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Regina
風呂場女神
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浴室の窓から
異世界人がこんにちは。
窓のむこうの摩訶不思議な人たちと
バスタイムを愛するOLの

ALPHAPOLIS
アルファポリス
おかしな湯けむりファンタジー!

(C)小声奏 /アルファポリス

Chapter 1

Baths are good.

Baths are soothing.

No matter how tired she was when she come back from work, once she got in the bath, half of it was forgotten.

Neither the nitpicking of her boss, nor the pressure of a crowded train could match the powers of baths.

Aahh, baths really are sublime.

Even though her room was messy enough that she couldn't even find a place to tread, she never failed to clean the bath.

Today as well, the bath was polished to a sparkle, and filled with hot water and a refreshing aromatic bath essence, Izumi was enjoying herself in the tub.

The feeling of the prickling heat that her skin was gradually acclimating to was enjoyable enough that she couldn't bear it.

In other words, it was worth it that she had come home with her face buried in the scarf in the terribly cold weather.

With her favourite tankoubon in one hand, she carried a slice of mikan to her mouth.

The juice in her mouth was an exquisite balance of tang and sweetness, and it was the moment when she swallowed it down seed and all that it happened.

-garari-

Just as she was wondering what the sound was, a hot wind blew in with a roar.

Caught by the wind, the pages of the book she was holding flipped about.

Aah-, even though I still have no idea what page I was on…!

The fact that she was still thinking about such carefree things might have been a form of escapism.

However, when she turned her head to see what the cause was, Izumi who always thought only of books, the bold and by no means sensitive Izumi, glanced towards the cause――towards the bathroom window in the northern side of the room.

There was a person who was wrapped from head to toe in a navy blue cloth, with only the exception of his eyes.

A MUMMY!? …or so Izumi initially thought, but around those slightly slanted eyes was youthful skin, and more importantly than anything, the colour of the cloth was blue.

While gazing at this intruder dumbfoundedly, the eyes gazed back with a sharp light.

First those eyes stared right at Izumi's face, then they slowly moved downwards, stopped again by her chest, then once again headed further down… When they reached her feet, the intruder tilted his head, before returning his gaze to her face, meeting her eyes.

At this point, Izumi finally remembered. She remembered that she was in the bath, and that she was fully naked.

"The heck are you? A peeper?"

"Would it be possible for you to spare me a cup of water?"

“Water?”

“Yeah. I haven’t had a drink the whole day. It’d really help if you could spare me a cup.”

The man looked at the hot water that filled the bathtub, and gulped.

Of course, Izumi was sitting in that bathtub, and so whether that gulp was from seeing her naked body, or whether it really was because of the water, was something Izumi couldn’t tell.

But well, even if the man really did just want the water, asking for a drink from water that somebody else has just bathed might make him a pervert after all.

Was she supposed to scream “KYAAA” or “MOLESTER!” in this situation?

The man’s face was covered, but had it not been an oft-used blue cloth, and instead a stocking or a balaclava or perhaps a full-face helmet, then Izumi would probably have screamed without a doubt.

However, the unique atmosphere that the man had held her back.

“Umm, water, right?”

Having said that though, she couldn’t give him water that she’d bathed in.

Izumi picked up the cup that she used for brushing her teeth while in the bath, and filled it with water after turning the tap on.

The cold water flowed into the cup and filled it.

Around the time that the cup was filled to the rim, she turned around.

The man’s gaze was aimed at Izumi’s butt.

Maybe I really should *scream.*

After clearing her throat with an *'ahem'*, the man raised his face as he suddenly realised what he was doing. When Izumi's half-open eyes met his gaze with disdain, the man quickly lowered his eyes.
While using her book to discreetly shield her chest, Izumi got up.

"Here you go."

"Sorry for this."

As expected, with the exception of his fingertips, the man's hand was covered in that blue cloth.

No, it wasn't only his fingertips. His shoulders and hips were wrapped in a large navy cloth as well.
Right, it was like he was somebody travelling in the desert with a camel.

Izumi who was often gazing at the man's outfit noticed that her cheek was being stroked by a hot and dry wind, and turned her eyes to what was behind the man.

"What the heck?"

Izumi widened her eyes and took in the scenery that spread out behind the man.

It was not a desert. Though it wasn't a desert, you could tell that the land was dry from a glance, and that this desolate land continued into the distance.

Sparse grass, and a glazing sun. There wasn't a single tree, nor any buildings. In this great expanse with nothing to block your view, the distant horizon was visible.

"Ummm?"

The man had drunk the water in one gulp with just the cloth around his mouth lowered and a line of water running down his lip. Izumi timidly called out to him.

“…What is it?”

The man gave a forceful wipe of his mouth.

“Where, are you?”

“Zaharya. Is there a problem?”

The man tilted his head in confusion, and held out the cup straightforwardly.

“You saved me. …I’m sorry to ask this, but may I have another cup?”

“Hahh. Sure.”

When she did as she was asked and filled the cup with water, the man once again drained it in a gulp. He seemed to drink it as though it were delicious wine from the heavens, and Izumi felt that he really hadn’t had any water the whole day.

“Um, and so, what are you doing in that Zaharya place?”

“I was stranded here.”

“I see…”

“It’s not funny.”

“Mn, sorry. I just wanted to try saying it.”

The man was looking at Izumi with cold eyes. Izumi obediently apologised.

“Do you have any containers? I’ll fill it with water.”

“Ah, that would help. Could you fill this?”

What the man held out to her was a withered bag that seemed to be made of tanned hide.

When Izumi took it, the sand that had covered it fell into the bathtub.

When she slowly moved it so that no more sand would fall, she rinsed the inside before filling it with water.

After filling the bag that held more water than expected, Izumi turned back to the man.

This time, it was Izumi's turn to send a cold look.

The man's gaze was once again turned to her butt.

"Ah, umm… Sorry."

Quickly turning away so that he wasn't look at Izumi's naked body, the man received the bag.

His rather suntanned skin had turned just a little red.

"Don't worry. It's already too late for that. By the way, you're stranded right? Do you have food?"

"Yeah, I have hard biscuits and salted jerky, and dried fruits as well. I'm fine for food."

It was a menu that seemed like it'd make you incredibly thirsty.

"Hahh, then… can I close the window yet? Sand has been blowing in for a while now, you know?"

"Y-, Yeah… Ah-, please wait!"

The man's large hand grabbed her hand as she touched the windowframe.

"I'd like to thank you."

"Nah, it's fine. It's was just water after all."

“Where I come from, there’s a saying that things you receive without paying back for will end up hindering you, you see.”

“Ahh. Like ‘there’s no such thing as a free lunch’? But even if you want to thank me, …you know?”

Izumi gazed at the man closely.
What kind of thanks could you get from a person stranded in a wasteland?

“How about this?”

The man took off the cloth that was covering his face.

“Oh? A handsome one…”

Looking at the man’s face again, his finely chiseled features overflowed with a wild manliness.

“I am honoured to receive your praise.”

The sharp-eared man who picked up on her accidental compliment, flashed her a grin.

His mouth was wrinkled in a cynical looking smile. He might have been older than the impression she got from his lively eyes.

“Please take this.”

After taking off the blue stones that decorated his ears, the man dropped it onto Izumi’s palm.

They rang out with a refreshing sound as the man placed his hand on Izumi’s.

“They’re earrings made of *lip’se*.”

“Oh-, na-, nah, it’s fine. They seem kinda super expensive. I’m not going to accept such an extravagant gift! All I gave you was water, you know?”

“What are you saying? That water saved my life. If you consider their values, these earrings are still lacking by far.”

“Well, I guess if you think about it that way, you’re right, but…”

“Our trade is complete. Sorry for disturbing your bath.”

The man unilaterally ended the conversation in a way that kept Izumi quiet.

“Then… I’ll accept them. Ah-, wait a minute!”

Izumi called out to stop him as he was about to shut the window.
The man raised an eyebrow, as if to ask ‘What?’.

“Water, is that enough?”

Wouldn’t a stranded person always be in need of more?

“Yeah, it seems that I’ve already left the desert, you see. There’s an oasis city to the east. If I continue walking, I’ll probably get there at some point. I’ve been in your care.”

After the window shut, the scene in the bathroom went back to normal.

An orange wall. A white floor. A yellow bathtub. A shower, a mirror, and a shelf with bathing items, and a bath sponge that hung from that shelf.

It was the scene of her bathroom that she was used to.

Amongst all of this was just the earrings that gave off an uncommon light, and seeing this, Izumi came back to her senses.

What the heck was that? What happened just now.

Hearing the ring of the earrings in her hand gave her this unsettled feeling, as though she had awoken from a dream, yet she hadn’t.
Izumi stared hard at the earrings. Embedded in a well-crafted gold base

were deeply coloured stones. The area like a curved needle meant that this was a hook-type earrings, and the dark stains attached to the hook section gave this a strong sense of reality.

Slowly, a strange anxiety crept into her from the tips of her toes.
When Izumi threw the earrings away at the edge of the bathtub, they floated up.

She hurriedly dried herself, put on her clothing, wrapped her wet hair in a towel, and hurried into the genkan.

Throwing on some sandals, she went around to the back of the house.

There was the bathroom window.

The scenery around her was, unmistakably not a wasteland. There was only a plain concrete block wall, and the hedge from the neighbouring house peeking over the wall.

Between the block wall and the wall of her house was a small path covered with gravel.

While observing her surroundings so carefully that she wouldn't miss an ant, she walked slowly forwards until she was in front of the bathroom, and then forcefully ripped open her window.

From the bathtub filled with hot water, rose steam that filled the room.

In her misty field of vision, she found a shining blue stone, and Izumi leaned against the window. Her legs had lost their strength.

Just what, was going on…?

Chapter 2

Teo Keh couldn’t calm down, and paced around the pavillion.

Although the thick pavillion was blocking the sun above his head, the temperature inside the pavillion was still quite hot.

However, Teo Keh neither opened a window, nor pulled up the hanging curtain that covered the entrance, and merely traced a circle on the floor, as though following the pattern of the carpet with his foot.

——————*They still haven’t? They still haven’t found him?*

His forehead ran with sweat, and his prided moustache had lost its lustre.

Teo Keh had served under the first king of the Kingdom of Yohk’Zai, Tenuhg, before he had revived the country, and had supported him.

When Tenuhg had revived the country he was 31, but at the time Teo Keh was only a youth in his teens. However, seeing through Teo Keh’s exceptional talent for politics, Tenuhg appointed him as prime minister when he was only halfway through his twenties.

The newly revived young country continued on vigorously to absorb ten odd clans, and two small countries in its surroundings, and in a flash had risen to become a great nation that controlled almost all of the Zaharya.

Tenuhg was a hero. At the very least, he was a hero to Teo Keh and the citizens of Yohk’Zai.

Tenuhg possessed a tenacious body and powerful vitality that matched his status as a hero, and he continued governing Yohk’Zai as a strong king,

until he died at 71 years of age in the bed of his favourite, and 48-years junior, concubine.

However, a hero does not necessarily have heroes as children.
The 46 year old successor of Tenuhg, Iyoh, was merely a kind-hearted man.

Had he been born to a commoner in the city, he would probably have lived a fortunate and happy life.

Unfortunately, Iyoh was born as the son of Tenuhg. There was no way that a recently risen, and still unsettled country was suitable for a kind and gentle ruler.

The result was that in only four years, the kingdom was meeting its decline.

Had Iyoh been a fool who hadn't noticed the disaster of his nation, or an unrepentent man who had grown cocky from becoming the king, the situation may still have been better. However, he was neither of these things. Lamenting his own weakness, unable to bear the pressure, growing thinner in a flash, and then finally succumbing to illness and leaving this world too son.

His reign had only lasted 4 years and a few days. It ended when Iyoh had just turned 50.

What was worse, was that Iyoh had no son.

Naturally, there was a dispute over the successor. It seemed that a struggle for the throne would break out between the two son-in-laws of Iyoh, and the sons of Tenuhg that were the younger half-brothers of Iyoh. You could say that they were on the eve of such a war.

———————*FOOLS!*

Teo Keh could not believe their stupidity.
If it became an internal war, then even the dissatisfaction of the affiliated clans and nations would turn towards them. To him, it was obvious what future a scattered and separated country held.

While days went as he continued to kick away and reject invitations to each faction, one day, he recalled a certain servant woman that he had driven out from the palace a long time ago.

Despite being a servant who did the laundry, perhaps as a prank of god, when she was 14, of all things, she began a relationship with Iyoh.

By the time Teo Keh had realised it, she was already with child.

A child with a woman of no standing. What's more, Iyoh was not an adult yet.

Teo Keh gave the woman money, and expelled her from the castle.

And like that, Teo Keh told Iyoh that she had happily accepted the consolation money, and left after having an abortion.

However, the truth was different. She did not abort the child.
Teo Keh had been prepared to even use force to make her do so, but the woman cried and clung to him.

She didn't want power nor riches. She just wanted to give birth to the child conceived between her and the person she loved. She wouldn't cause trouble for Iyoh or anybody else. She just begged Teo Keh for permission to give birth.

Seeing the crying woman holding her belly, Teo Keh couldn't bring himself to do it.

After promising to never name the father, and to live in a faraway land, he let the woman go.

Had that child been a boy… thought Teo Keh.

It was the child of a woman he had driven from the castle himself.

He knew that he was being selfish. However, he had no other plans left.

And so Teo Keh followed the woman's footsteps, and discovered that she had given birth to a boy.

Whether it was fortune or misfortune, the woman had passed away ten years ago. Hearing that the boy with Iyoh's blood was working as a member of a desert merchant group, Teo Keh secretly sent soldiers to find him.

But this was the result.

The ray of light that he had found after much trouble had had his merchant group attacked by bandits, and by the time the merchants were located, their remains were buried beneath the sand.

When Teo Keh received the news, he began planning the escape of his clan to outside the country.

However, no matter how they dug up the sand, they couldn't find a man like him. The only bodies they found were those of men in their prime, and in the end, they couldn't find the man who should have been 35.

Though out of character, Teo Keh wanted to thank god.

However, the circumstances being what they were, he couldn't predict the result, and their time was limited. What's more, the only clue were the earrings that Iyoh had given the woman. Inherited from his mother, they were earrings made of the blue rock *lip'se*, that he had never parted from in these past ten years. If they hadn't been taken by bandits, then they should still have been hanging from his ears.

Teo Keh prayed. He prayed with all his heart.

After continuing his silent prayer with his eyes closed, when he parted his eyelids again, he doubted his eyes.

"…Again? Give me a break…"

And then, he doubted his ears.

"Woman… What are you doing?"

What he saw before him was a strange, strange, scene.

As though a rectangle had been cut from it, a certain part of the pavilion scenery had changed, and inside it, was a woman with honey coloured skin, but in an appearance that was basically naked, she was standing there with bubbles dripping from her, clenching tightly a pink object.

“Well, I’m cleaning the bath. Problem?”

“Cleaning the bath? Is that a bath over there?”

“That’s right. A bath. What are you doing? You don’t seem to be stranded, do you.”

“I am not stranded but… What exactly is going on? Are you a user of the dark arts?”

Teo Keh noticed that his own voice had trembled when he asked the question.

“Huh? Dark arts? As if I can use something like that. Isn’t this something that you did?”

“Absurd!”

When he accidentally raised his voice, the woman’s shoulders trembled with a start.
The woman looked frightened, but in the next moment her expression turned angry.

“Hey! Don’t raise your voice like that. I don’t know what’s going on either! I mean, just last night a stranded man appeared, and now there’s a full-bellied and arrogant old man. What’s going on…”

Her vigour was only there for the beginning, and her voice quickly wilted. Seeing the confused and frowning woman who seemed like she would cry at any moment, Teo Keh became flustered. He was fundamentally somebody weak to the tears of women after all.

“S-, Sorry… I got a little excited, didn’t I? Apologies.”

After giving her face a wipe with her slender, bare arm, she tightly pressed her lips together.
Seeing that she wasn’t going to start crying, Teo Keh felt relieved.

“But still, what on earth is this?”

It was a scene that seemed stranger the longer you looked.

This space had suddenly appeared in the dark red pavillion.

This space that opened from his hips to above his head looked just like a painting floating in the air.

However, a painting where the person in it moved, and talked. And what’s more, where the person was a woman in a strange appearance.

Teo Keh stared hard at the woman.

Her pale skin was similar to the people of the north, but despite that, her facial features were quite flat.

The clothing she was wearing was also quite strange. A light blue cloth covered only her chest and hips, and only a string covered her shoulders. As for her legs, everything from the thighs down were laid bare. Despite that, this woman showed no signs of embarassment, and was calm.

“Heyy, could it be that you’re troubled for water?”

“…Water? My water supplies are not particularly troubling, but…”

Teo Keh frowned. While tilting his head and wondering why this woman thought he was troubled for water, he suddenly gasped.

“Did you say that something like this had happened before? You said “again” earlier, did you not?”

If his memories weren’t mistaken, that was her first line.

The woman had experienced this before. And that person was somebody in need of water.

Teo Keh was agitated enough that it felt like the bottom of his guts would jump up.

“What type of person… What type of person was the one that you met!? Was he not wearing a pair of blue earrings!?”

It felt like he was being pulled by a fine thread.

Teo Keh leaned forward in excitement, and tightly gripped the silver frame of the rectangular hole.

“Y-, Yes. He was, but?”

It really was him!

To he who hadn’t believed in the gods even a little, in this moment his faith had taken a 180 degree turn.

“Ohhh! God! I thank you. What were the earrings made of? What kind of design were they? Please tell me in detail.”

“I don’t mind, but…”

Seeing Teo Keh’s breath getting more and more wild, the woman leaned backwards, and raising her arms, she showed her palms to try and calm him down.

“Um, well… could you not get mad?”

Perhaps feeling guilty about something, the woman suddenly looked away from him.

“W-, what’s the matter?”

The woman took something from a clear, rectangular shelf that was attached to the wall, before slowly presenting it to Teo Keh.

“This is-!?”

Teo Keh’s eyes widened.

Those earrings were undoubtedly the ones he had been looking for. Tenuhg had given these to Iyoh’s mother, the queen, and after she passed, they were passed to Iyoh, and from Iyoh they were passed to the girl that he loved, and from her, they were inherited by the child she had given birth to; it was unmistakably those pair of *lip’se* earrings.

But something had happened, and those earrings were only half their original size.

“Ohhh, ohhhh, what a thing to have happened.”

Receiving the earrings from the woman, Teo Keh shut his eyes.

The place where it had been cut was more beautiful than he had ever seen it. The one who had cut this was surely a person of great skill. If there was a person like that amongst the bandits, then…

Teo Keh conjectured that the prince had died, and sank to his knees defeated.

He, no, Yohk’Zai, had lost their hope.

“Umm. I’m really sorry about this. I didn’t think that you’d get this depressed. Um, it wasn’t on purpose, you know? I have no idea how it happened either, after all. To think that it would disappear once you brought it out of the bathroom. Nobody would have expected that, right?”

“…Hah?”

Hearing the woman’s words, Teo Keh lost what he was going to say next.

“It disappeared. When I tried to take the earrings out of the bathroom, the parts that went past the boundary of the door disappeared! Ah-, don’t ask me “WHY!?” okay? I have no idea either, after all.”

The woman frantically tried to explain, in an anxious voice. It was an incredibly unbelievable story, but the woman didn't seem to be lying.

"It disappeared…"

If this was true, then it was something for Teo Keh to celebrate.

"Then the one who was wearing these earrings was safe then?"

Teo Keh gulped.

"Yeah, he was. For a stranded person, he was pretty lively."

"Truly!?"

When he bent his body through the window, the woman took a step back as though overpowered, and quietly nodded.

"And what of that person? Where did they go?"

"Where? …Ah-, if I remember correctly, he said that he was headed to an oasis town in the east. And the place that we met was the Zaharya. He said that he had left the desert, and certainly, that place was more a wasteland than a desert, but sand flew in from that window and it was pretty rough cleaning it up, so maybe he had only just left the desert, huh?"

"Did he have a *ruba*?"

"A *ruba*? What's that?"

Teo Keh couldn't answer the woman's question.

From the woman's reaction, there didn't seem to be a *ruba* with him.

Had he been pulling a *ruba* along, the woman's reaction would have probably been different after all.

With his eyes shut, in Teo Keo's mind he projected the dizzying map of Zaharya. Zaharya was huge. There was probably no merchant stupid

enough to walk through it during the day without a *ruba*, nor sufficient water or food. For a man to go by foot from the place of the bandit attack, walking only at night, it would take him 3 or 4 days to leave the desert. After that, walking for a whole day without stop, he would reach a major trade route. If he sought help on a trade route with many merchants coming and going, then there was no mistake that he would be reaching the oasis town around now.

“Girl! I thank you. Because of you, the lives of the innocent people in this nation may have been saved. No, rather, we will save them.”

“Ha-, hah… That sounds like a lot of work. Ummm, please try your best.”

The woman’s mouth twitched in bewilderment.

She didn’t know about the circumstances of Teo Keh’s side after all, so it couldn’t be helped. Teo Keh lowered his gaze to the earrings in his hand, before fixing his stance, and looking at the woman.

“I am the prime minister of Yohk’Zai, Teo Keh. Won’t you give me these earrings? I am willing to compensate as much as you want for them.”

There were a clue towards the prince that he had finally found. Teo Keh couldn’t help but feel that if he parted from these, the ray of hope that he had finally found again, would once more be lost.

“Eh-, that’s totally fine. To begin with, it was something I traded for water after all.”

Teo Keh was on guard, wondering if she would complain for an extravagant sum, but the woman readily agreed.

“What do you wish in return for this? Gold? Jewels?”

When Teo Keh said this, the woman frowned, and then sighed.

“I see. It wasn’t good to take something for free, right? …Ummm, well then, please bring me any old rock lying around.”

More than admiration, what Teo Keh felt was astonishment. What a greedless woman.

“Are you fine with that? If you so wish, we could receive you with an appropriate position in our country, you know?”

When they were too unselfish, it instead made you uneasy.

“Eh? I don’t need something like that.”

Teo Keh’s eyes seemed like they would fall out of his sockets. He couldn’t believe the words he had just heard. For a powerful nation such as Yohk’Zai to treated as “something like that”. She had a different skin colour, but he thought she was otherwise a regular woman, but as expected, she might really have been an employer of the dark arts. Teo Keh suddenly found the woman fearful.

“I-, I will immediately pick up a rock. Please wait a little.”

Teo Keh who had now wanted to end negotiations before the woman changed her mind, hurried outside the pavillion after leaving those words.

The sun was said to have been born from the breath of the Goddess Shawa, and in the Month of Onse, it relentlessly scorched the ground.

Teo Keh produced a cloth from his pocket, and after wrapping a rock that was small enough to fit in his palm, he picked it up and returned to the pavilion where the woman was waiting.

“Is this fine?”

He pulled off the cloth and showed her the rock.
Seeing the stone with a reddish-brown lustre, the woman nodded in satisfaction.

“It’s fine.”

“Wait!”

When the woman casually reached out for it, Teo Keh called out to stop her in a panic. And when he did, the woman exaggeratedly snapped her hand away.

“W-, What?”

“What are you doing touching a fire stone barehanded? It isn’t my business if you burn yourself, you know.”

“Fire stone?”

The woman tilted her head in confusion. Teo Keh was bewildered. If she didn’t even know of fire stones, then what *did* she know of?

“In the Onse Month, stones baked by the sun of Shawa will turn into fire stones. You said that that was a bath, didn’t you? Try filling it up with water, and putting this stone in it. With a bath of about that size, this stone alone should be just right to heat it to bath temperature.”

“Is that true!? Woww, so convenient.”

The woman’s eyes suddenly sparkled.

What did “This’ll cut down the gas bill!” mean? Seeing how extremely happy the woman was, perhaps even employers of black magic have their own worries. Or so he thought, as the existences he had thought of as nothing but fearful and abominable, suddenly felt closer to him.

“Our trade is complete. I thank you, Miss Magician.”

Teo Keh folded his arms and expressed his thanks.

“Ah-, wait, hang on.”

The moment he heard her call out to stop him, Teo Keh’s face stiffened.

As expected, was a fire stone not enough for compensation?

“Could I ask you a little something?”

It seems that the rumours about employers of the dark arts wanting information on occasion, were indeed true.

Just what kind of classified information would she seek? Teo Keh braced himself.

“That person you’re looking for. How long has he been wearing these earrings?”

“Hah?”

He involuntarily let out a foolish sound.

“I had received information that he had worn them ever since his mother passed away ten years ago, but…”

What did she plan on doing after asking about something like that? That the employers of the dark arts truly *were* an entirely different existence, was something that sank deeply into his heart.

TL Note: Having come this far, I’m suspecting that there was only one earring. Plurals and singulars are rarely specified in Japanese, and I kind of didn’t think too much about it. Thinking about it again, there was mn, probably only one earring.

Chapter 3

Izumi was exhilarated.

The stone that she had obtained through that strange incident was much handier than expected.

She filled a bath with water, and then tossed in the stone that she had received from the large-bellied Teo Keh. And when she did, after only a few dozen seconds, it had transformed into a bath of the perfect temperature. What's more, it wouldn't cool. No matter how much time passed, the water temperature was constant. This was as good as saying there was no gas bill, so to the bath-loving Izumi, it was incomparably valuable compared to those earrings that she couldn't even take out of the bathroom.

I've sure made a killing.
It was natural that she thought as such.

Izumi was enjoying her bath as well today.

In her right hand was a bottle of ice-cold sake, and in her left hand was a sake cup. She had absolutely no plans tomorrow, so this was her reward to herself.
Izumi suddenly looked at the submerged stone by her feet. Since this was a fire stone that heated water, could it be that there was a stone that was used for chilling water instead? IF there was such a drink, then she could bring it into the bathroom and enjoy cold liquor at any time; living the dream.

While indulging in such convenient delusions, Izumi brought the cup to her lips.

"Kuahh~ So good!"

The cool sake flowed into her hot body, and healed her weary body and soul. It was true that Japanese often called alcohol the ‘best medicine’.

Exhaling in delight, her cooled oesophagus warmed up in the next instant like a small flame had been swallowed. It was that moment that it actually felt like reality that she was free all day tomorrow.

And during this moment of supreme bliss, a **-gagari-** sound completely ruined it.

A wind even cooler than the cup in her hand suddenly blew into the bathroom.

“…You’re kidding me.”

Izumi turned her head towards the window, and fell into silence.
A yeti was staring at Izumi in shock.

“What are you? A mystic?”

The yeti spoke fluent words.

“Uh, no. I should be asking you what *you* are. A yeti? Bigfoot? A sasquatch? Or perhaps a yukiotoko?”

“What are those supposed to be.”

The yeti groaned. Trying to raise a minimum defence, Izumi raised the sake bottle into her hand. While giving Izumi’s meagre resistance a glance, the yeti placed its hands to its head, before sliding off its fur.

Izumi was wide-eyed.
What she was sure had been its natural form had turned out to be a hat. Because of the fur that had covered everything but the eyes, nose and mouth, as well as the beard that had been the same colour as the fur, she was sure that it was a yeti or a similar looking creature, but once the visitor removed the hat, it had transformed into a proper human man.

“My name is Setsugen. What is yours, Mystic-dono?”

“Uh, no, like I said, I’m not a mystic though,” mumbled Izumi, as she looked at the man named Setsugen. His beard made him look old, but his voice and casual behaviour overflowed with youthfulness.

Setsugen looking about the bathroom in great interest. After observing the lightbulb with great interest, he returned his gaze to Izumi before frowning.

“So you in the middle of a purification ceremony…”

It seemed like it would take an incredible amount of effort to explain the circumstances to Setsugen. Izumi quickly gave up.

“I’m Izumi. And so, do you also… uh, have some sort of problem, perhaps? Like for example, being stranded, or perhaps in the middle of looking for someone?”

Lately, Izumi had been thinking about the mysterious incidents in her bathroom whenever she was free. The result that she arrived at after her pondering was that, perhaps she had been tasked with the role of rescuing that stranded man and then introducing him to Teo Keh.

Izumi was an atheist. She believed in neither God nor Buddha, but she did go to pray at a shinto shrine during New Years, and she listened to the chanting of the buddhist priests during funerals, and vaguely thought that one day she would get married in a church. Neither God nor Buddha existed, so religion was a matter of the person themselves. Even now she still believed this. But despite that, she felt that she had been tasked with a role; she herself felt that this was contradictory. Although she felt so, if those two safely met up, then her role would be finished too, and it would be farewell to this mysterious world, or so she thought. After all, the window was no longer connected to that mysterious world, or so she thought…

But *this* happened.

Setsugen inclined his head in confusion.

“Well, I’m not stranded, nor am I searching for anyone.”

Oh. I was wrong.
Izumi tilted her head as well. At that moment, Izumi noticed that white snow was fluttering in from behind Setsugen.

Looking more carefully, Setsugen was in a mountain hut that was ridiculously shabby for where it was. The wind blew noisily against the thin looking walls. Even thought it was cold enough that you would need to wear fur indoors, the thing in the middle of the room that seemed to be a sunken fireplace wasn't on fire.

"Could it be, that you need firewood… or something?"

Setsugen once again inclined his head.

"No, I was actually preparing to leave."

So that was wrong too. The man didn't seem to be particularly troubled. Although the window connected to a mysterious world again, perhaps there wasn't a reason.

"Where are you going?"

Because she had been wrong apparently, Izumi met a let-down, and asked him out of curiosity.
After falling into silence for a while, the man replied in a low voice, "Zaharya".

"――――――Got it!"

Izumi reflexively stood up from the bath.
The surface of the water shook and spilled, and the water pushed the tray with the sake cup against the wall.

"You want to meet with Teo Keh, right?"

The man's face stiffened before her eyes.

"Are you a person from Yohk'Zai?"

“Eh-… Eh? No. No, I’m not.”

The man’s naked wariness and hostility threw Izumi into a panic.
She had been so sure that he wanted to meet Teo Keh. Even though she had been so sure that he was searching for the man with the blue earrings as well…

“I just met that Teo Keh uncle by chance and talked to him for a little. We aren’t even acquaintances, to say nothing of me having anything to do with Yohk’Zai.”

“You met by chance?”

Setsugen raised an eyebrow.

“Right, right. I met with this man stranded in a desert and gave him some water, and when I did, the next day Teo Keh appeared, and when I told him about the stranded man he was incredibly happy… It seems he was looking for him. I’m sure it was somebody very important to Teo Keh, don’t you think?”

“A man Teo Keh was searching for? …Searching for… Searching for…”

The man repeated it over and over as though carefully considering her words.

“Ummm…”

Izumi timidly called out to the man.

“Is there some problem?”

“Did that man meet Teo Keh?”

Izumi shook her head at the scowling Setsugen.

“I don’t know. Because after that, I never met the stranded man or even Teo Keh again.”

‘But,’ continued Izumi.

“He was saying something about an Oasis city in the east, so if he’s alive, I think they met.”

Izumi’s words were half due to her hope. The man was somebody she had met through some twist in fate, and had given water to. As expected, she really did hope that he was saved.

The man looked to the sky, and closed his eyes.

His clenched jaw faintly trembled.

Izumi couldn’t endure it.

Apparently, Yohk’Zai was not an amicable nation for Setsugen. She had no idea what relation the two had, but it was heartbreaking to see him bear with his feelings of regret.

The man who had kept his eyes closed for a long time let out a sigh, and looked back down.

“I see. So Teo Keh found him, huh.”

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but I’m sorry.”

Izumi lowered her head in a bow.

“Why are you apologising.”

“Because it wasn’t good for you that Teo Keh met the man that I saved, right?”

The man smiled. A bitter smile that seemed to have given up on something.

“It is nothing for you to worry about, Mystic-dono. All you did was help somebody.”

Izumi lost her words. She might have done something unnecessary. But somebody who needed help had appeared before her eyes, and when she had a way to save him, it was hard to look away.

“Now then, I no longer have business in Zaharya. I’ll return to my country.”

Setsugen stood up and put the fur back on.

“By the way――――”

While tying his bags back to his back, Setsugen averted his eyes from Izumi and muttered awkwardly.

“For a while now, it’s been completely visible.”

“… … … …GYAHH!”

Izumi vigorously crouched into the bathtub. When somebody else told her that in embarrassment, it made her embarrassed as well.

The overflowing water carried the tray out of the bathtub.

Hearing the crashing sounds made Izumi fall further into panic.
Did the cup I just bought break?

“Uah!? Tsch-!”

Hearing her hand out in the direction of the sound, this time she was shocked by her foot touching something hot, and jumped out of the bathtub. Flustered, she turned on the shower.

“What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

Setsugen asked in pity, as Izumi ran cold water over her leg, even forgetting to hide her body.

“Ahh, yeah. I’m fine. It seems I forgot that about the fire stone and accidentally stepped on it.”

Izumi replied miserably.

“Fire stone?”

Setsugen peered into the bathtub in curiosity.

“This red stone?”

“Yeah. If you fill the tub with water and throw that in, it’ll really quickly turn into hot water. Aahh, this is something I got when I told Teo Keh to bring me a rock from somewhere, you see.”

“…A random rock lying about can change water to hot water!?”

Setsugen seemed to be shocked.
But well, yeah. That’s how you’d normally be. I was shocked too.
Izumi nodded with a ‘Yup, yup.’

“Fire stone. So such a wonderful thing can be found in Zaharya.”

Eyes set ablaze, Setsugen stared at the fire stone.

Getting a bad feeling, Izumi said “W-, Well then, time to get out of the bath I guess. I’m getting dizzy from the heat.” as she tried to put the lid back on the bathtub. And the lid was stopped by Setsugen’s bulky hand.

“Please wait, Mystic-dono. This! Could you please give this to me!?”

Ahh, I knew it.
Izumi hung her head.

“Okay… What do you want to trade it for?”

“Trade? Ah, you’re right. It wouldn’t be any good to receive such a wonderful thing for free. But, I don’t have anything decent on me right now.”

Setsugen took down the bag from his back and peered inside, before sighing.

It was irritating to see him glance greedily at the fire stone.

“Hey, you’re somewhere cold, right? There won’t be fire stones, but what about ice stones or something?”

“Ice stones?”

“Right, right. I’d be pretty happy if I could chill this liquor.”

“You enjoy drinking, Mystic-dono?”

After falling into thought for a while, Setsugen struck his hand.

“Please wait here.”

After saying that and leaving his bag still opened, he hurriedly ran out of the cabin.

The moment that the door opened, the howling wind and snow vigorously blew into the room.

Unable to bear it, Izumi sank back into the bathtub.

Setsugen immediately returned. In his hand was a green grass that shone with a smooth lustre.

Seeing as the roots were still attached, he had apparently gone to uproot them just now.

“This is frostsnow grass. According to legend, when the God of Might and Wine Zauna had his treasured wine hidden by his wife, in his cries and grief, his tears fell to the earth and from that spot appeared the first frostsnow grass. It can be found growing on snowy mountainpeaks, but…”

Crying just because his wine was hidden? To think there was actually such a pathetic God of Might.
Hearing this shameful story that seemed to devalue it, Izumi lost her tension.
Setsugen cut off the stem of one of the leaves.

“Try putting this leaf into your wine bottle. No matter what kind of cheap wine it is, leaving this leaf in overnight will turn it into wine of the highest grade, you know.”

Is he telling the truth?
She couldn’t help but doubt his words. Realising this about herself, Izumi sighed. The fire stone was also something that she had originally gotten for water. Even if Setsugen was making up a lie to get it, wouldn’t that be fine?

“Well, that’s fine.”

Hearing Izumi consent, Setsugen almost danced for joy.

“Our trade is complete. I am in your debt! With this, Triht may yet be saved.”

Izumi was startled. Apparently she had once again gotten involved in something major. Wrapping the fire stone in a towel before handing it over, Izumi hurriedly placed her hand to the window.

“Well then, I’m going to leave. Take care on your journey back, okay?”

“Yes. You take care not to catch a cold, Mystic-dono.”

Waving a hand towards the grinning man who had once against become a yeti, Izumi shut the window. And when she did, she sneezed.

Chapter 4

The manor was in an uproar.

Footsteps rough enough that it seemed the floorboards would break, the cacophony of tableware being smashed, the commotion of the confused residents.

Each time he heard the rough voice mixed in with the noise, he felt the fingers in his hands tremble.

Sentoor was anxious.

Who could have imagined that at such a critical time, Yukama, his lord's uncle, would suddenly take such a forceful measure.

"Princess! Please make haste."

Sentoor turned around. His lord's elder sister, Princess Yunoha, was looking back at him with a pale face. The lustrous hair famed for resembling the finest thread from a *ka'ikoh*, was now dishevelled across the cheeks of her oval face.

The fingers in his hand were slender enough that he thought they might break with just a squeeze. They were freezing so he thought that the tension and anxiety might have affected her circulation, so Sentoor carefully wrapped his boorish hands around hers again.

He had to allow the princess to escape.

Yukama was targeting the one famed as the number one beauty in the nation, Princess Yunoha, as well as the position of king.

The previous king had passed away last year, and his son Setsugen inherited his position as king of Triht. Setsugen was a youth of little more than twenty, but he was plenty qualified to be king. In these last two years, he had always stood at the front and endeavoured to protect his clan and nation.

Yukama did not think fondly of this.

With things contrary to his expectations, he abused his authority as Setsugen's guardian, and aimed for Setsugen's sister, Princess Yunoha. His plan was to marry the princess and steal the seat of king from Setsugen.

Yukama's dirty scheme had been stopped by Setsugen and his talented subordinates. Though they had a lot of trouble in definitively stopping Yukama, even so, they protected the Princess.

However, this year Triht suffered a harsh cold, of a kind unseen in recent years.

With the ground frozen from the breath of the legendary *suu'rin*, an being that lived underground, farmers found it difficult to even plough the fields, to say nothing of growing crops. On top of that, the storehouse for emergency food was struck by lightning, and half of it was turned to ashes.

At this rate, a great many people would starve to death come next winter.

On the verge of ruin, argument after argument, one day a completely unexpected bit of news reached their ears.

Yohk'Zai, the nation that governed the Zaharya beyond Mt. Pirenia, had fallen into a struggle for the throne, and was on the brink of civil war.

To Triht, it was like a gift from heaven.

Taking advantage of the domestic chaos, they would ally with the Kak'Kenah tribe who lived south of Mt. Pirenia, and together they would take a part of the Zaharya. That was the aim of Setsugen and his retainers.

Yohk'Zai was a nation with shallow history.

By no means had loyalty reached every corner of the nation, every corner of their hearts. The plan would surely go well. So believed Setsugen, as he began his journey with just a few companions.

Following contact after contact, they had only recently received a positive response.

Even though Triht would be saved with just a little bit to go, thanks to Yukama's shallow ambitions, it might all come to nothing.

Sentoor's ears caught the sound of footsteps from enemy intruders, as he rushed towards the back entrance. They were coming this way, from a corner of the manor. Two of them, no, it seemed there were three. Sentoor clicked his tongue. It was conduct unbecoming of a warrior, but right now there was nobody to admonish him.

"This way!"

Opening a nearby door, he slipped in, and quietly closed the door.

They had escaped into a room for entertaining guests. Inside the room was a simple wooden table, and on each side were straw mat seats made from *sen* stalks. Although the door was closed, because there was no fire here, it was freezing.

Sentoor quickly scanned the room, but there was nowhere to hide. On the other side of the wooden sliding door was the courtyard, but it was likely that Yukama's subordinates were there.

Is this as far as we go?

Sentoor was ready to die at any time. But, how about Princess Yunoha? Thinking that it was necessary that she protect her honour if it came to it, he turned around, and met his eyes with the princess who had drawn a dagger from within her sash.

Her trembling hand gripped the hilt, and she looked at Sentoor. Sentoor saw unwavering determination in her ultramarine eyes, like the sky just before

dawn, and he unconsciously knelt to the floor as a retainer.

As he thought, he could only serve these siblings.

The clamour from the hallway was getting noisier.

Come whenever you wish!

Sentoor stood up, and stood in front of Yunoha as though to protect her.

Drawing his sword and standing in a vigilant guard, a rectangular frame suddenly appeared before him.

Fine carvings were cut into the frame, and inside the frame was a translucent board.

Sentoor shuddered. If even a mystic had joined hands with Yukama, then…

With a clatter, the translucent board slid to the side. Sentoor thrust the sword in his hand towards the frame. The moment that he felt a response from his sword,

“GYOEHH-”

a sound like the dying cry of a *goeru* squashed flat under the wheels of a flatcar, echoed throughout the room.

Shouldn’t they be hibernating under the earth in this season? wondered Sentoor as he tilted his head, before becoming dumbfounded at the scene before him.

A naked woman was standing there with what seemed to be a seamless white bucket, thrust out before her chest.

Sentoor’s sword had struck right through the middle of that white object.

——————————*Skilled.*

A cold sweat ran down his back.

To block a fully committed thrust from a swordsman like him meant that this woman was no ordinary enemy. Was this an assassin hired by the mystic, or was the mystic an expert themself?

“I ask for your name.”

His blood as a swordsman was heating up.

“Eh? Izumi.”

The woman named herself, looking somewhat dumbfounded. To think that she had even trained herself in acting to incite carelessness. Even the fact that she was naked was undoubtedly a tactic to distract the enemy. Sentoor was speechless. She lacked nothing as an opponent.

“My name is Sentoor. I challenge you.”

After releasing his grip from the sword that was completely trapped in the white shield, he reached his hand to the other sword by his waist.

“HAHH!? Hang on a moment! What the heck are you saying after stabbing a sword through my keropii© bucket? No, seriously, if you’re done then I’m closing the window!”

Though in a state of confusion, the woman still shouted angry words at Sentoor.

“Turning tail after meeting resistance during an assassination? Laughable!”

Sentoor set up a sword guard.

“Hey-! Do you have brain problems?”

Sentoor was crestfallen. He had thought that for his last moments, he had met a worthy opponent, but he was apparently wrong. The moment that he thought to cut down this unsightly assassin in the middle of her excuses, the woman turned her eyes to the person behind him.

“Hey, you there! Can’t you do something about this uncle? He isn’t listening. I’m not an assassin! Just as I was about to take a bath, I thought that since the water was hot I would just open the window to cool down a little. To begin with, just what kind of world would you find a naked and unarmed assassin! Or could it be that the assassins in your world are exhibitionists? Are they all exhibitionists!”

After talking on and on without even taking a moment to breathe, she sent an imploring gaze at Princess Yunoha.
Sentoor began to find something strange about this woman in her vigour.

“Sentoor, lower your sword. This person seems to be unrelated to Uncle Yukama.”

Princess Yunoha supported this feeling of his in a quiet voice.

“You’re not an assassin hired by Yukama?”

The woman nodded as though it were natural.

“I’ve never even heard the name Yukama before.”

Sentoor gazed at the woman head-on. Her dark eyes felt somehow bottomless and even seemed terrifying, but she didn’t seem to be lying.

“And so, I’m unrelated, so mind if I close the window?”

The woman put her hand against the translucent board. From her movements, you could see impatience and anxiety.

So she really was a suspicious person…? suspected Sentoor once again, but the moment that he was about to turn his eyes towards her, Yukama’s angry shout came from the hallway.

“Yunoha! Where are you? Won’t you hurry up and come out? You’re going to be mine.”

Yunoha’s thin shoulders trembled with a start.

“Yunoha!” “Yunoha!”

As the shouts for the Princess came one after another, the woman frowned and looked at the Princess.

“Yunoha… Is that you?”

“Yes.”

Princess Yunoha brandished the dagger that she had been gripping at her chest.
Although paled, her face was not at all pathetic.

“This is as far as we go. Sentoor, please be my second.”

Sentoor shut his eyes and nodded. While slowly raising his eyelids, he poured strength into his sword arm.

Princess Yunoha looked at Sentoor, and raised the corners of her mouth just a little. It was a shockingly beautiful smile. She would be able to die without burdening her lord… her younger brother. The smile might have been filled with that kind of satisfaction.

Kneeling on the spot, Princess Yunoha pointed the blade at herself.

“May Triht be blessed with joy.” she muttered, before hanging her head.
After making sure the swing of the blade would meet her exposed white nape, Sentoor raised his sword up high.

“Ha-? Eh-? W-, Wait a moment!”

A panicked voice distracted Sentoor.

The woman threw the white shield in her hand behind herself, before placing her hands on the frame and leaning forward.

“Is something troubling you!?”

It sounded like the cry of somebody in desperation.

“You’re troubled, right!? Ummm, ummmm, please leave it to me. I’ll save you!”

The woman placed her hand against her chin and seemed to think.

“The hoarse voice outside is Yukama? And, you’re being chased by Yukama. Am I right?”

Each still holding their own blades, Sentoor and Yunoha nodded together.

“I’ll hide you, so come here. Climb over this frame, come on.”

The woman beckoned.

“What are you doing? Hurry!”

The sound of Yukama’s footsteps were getting closer. His hesitation only lasted a moment. He recalled an old saying; you can’t catch a *tura* cub without entering a *tura* den.

Sentoor picked up Yunoha, and finding his determination, passed through the rectangular frame.

The moment that he stepped down, his foot was wet with hot water.

Speaking of which, she did mention that she was going to take a bath…

The wet clothing clung to his legs and it felt like he was going to fall, but just as he was about to he corrected his posture and shifted the way he was carrying her so that she wouldn’t get wet.

“If we close it completely, you might not be able to go back, so I’m just going to leave a little open, okay? I’m going to go find something to use as a weapon.”

“Wait, Mystic-dono. What of us!?”

“Just stay in the bath or something! Listen, you absolutely can’t leave, okay? In particular, y-, you definitely can’t pass through this door.”

Leaving those words behind, the woman hurriedly ran away.

Being left behind, there was nothing for Sentoor and Yunoha in his arms to do, except look at each other dumbfounded.

The woman returned before long. Her body was wrapped in a white cloth that covered everything from her chest to buttocks. She was grasping a cylinder with an illustration of a terrifying winged monster.

“What’s that?”

“It’s insecticide. For killing wasps.”

Without even minding that her cloth would get wet, the woman entered the bucket with the hot water, and stood next to Sentoor.

She peeked through the gap in the translucent board.

The sounds of the door being violently hit could be heard.

“Yunoha! …What’s this?”

It was Yukama’s voice. His angry bellows had turned into a voice of confusion.

“Yunoha? Are you in there?”

“She’s not! Piss off already, baldy!”

In reply to Yukama’s probing voice, the woman yelled back vigorously in reply.
But, wasn’t that the same as admitting that she was here…?

“What are you doing, Yunoha. To be sitting there with a suspicious mystic like this.”

Being blind to his own shortcomings, he sure could talk. Sentoor gently lowered the Princess――――to the floor of mysterious white

substance————before reaching his hand to the sword at his waist, and being stopped by the woman.

“Leave it to me.”

What did she intend to do? ————————They met each other’s gaze, but the woman just nodded, and had no intention of speaking. But she had declared herself that they should leave it to her, so she probably had some sort of plan. Sentoor abided her will, and stayed to the side.

Leaving violent and loud footsteps and not even trying to hide his irritation, Yukama entered the room. Behind him were a number of his underlings.

The faces of the men visible through the crack by the board were familiar. There were a bunch who only cared about money and knew nothing about loyalty, but their skill was the real thing.

Sentoor began to feel anxious.

However, even when they walked past the round table, the woman showed no signs of movement.

One step, and then another step. They shortened the distance. Yet, the woman didn’t move.

————————*This is the limit.*

Sentoor gripped the hilt of his sword.

Yukama was right beyond the frame.

And at that moment, the woman threw open the translucent board, thrust both arms forward, and held up the cylinder.

“Eat this! Bee Easy© Spray Double!”

Together with the chant of a curse, a mist spouted vigorously from the cylinder.

Yukama covered his eyes with both hands.

“W-, What is this… I-, I can’t see.”

Looking at the suffering Yukama, the woman declared loudly.

“I’ve cursed you. If you don’t wash our your eyes for three days and three nights with water thawed from perpetual snow, your eyes are going to become useless. If you wash it a little, you might be able to see again for a while, but unless you continue for three days and nights, the pain will return before long.”

How terrifying.

Sentoor felt fear towards the woman, and reflexively covered his own eyes with his palm. It seemed that Yukama’s followers were afraid of the curse as well, and not a single person moved.

Finally, Yukama collapsed onto the floor.

“Don’t you think it would be better for you to go home?”

The woman said this as she looked down upon Yukama.

Curled up on the floor, from between the gaps in his fingers, Yukama’s now bright red eyes turned towards her. Those eyes, filled even now with ambition, rolled here and there, before fixing on Princess Yunoha behind Sentoor.

“Yunoha. Listen well. Your brother has gone cold a long time ago. I paid the younger brother of the Kak’Kenah Clan Chief in Zaharya to poison his wine at the feast. His body should be arriving any day now.”

Sentoor was assaulted by a rage like the blood currents in his body had gone backwards. The irrepressible feelings rose up from his gut, and stirred his body into action.

“YOUUU-”

Drawing his sword, he stepped onto the frame. The frozen henchmen of Yukama came back to their senses, and rushed over to their lord's side. Outnumbered. It might not be possible for him to take Yukama's life. But at the very least, he wouldn't be able to calm down unless he attacked. Going along with his rage, the moment he was about to step forward out of the frame, a naked arm wrapped around his waist.

"Calm down. What you need to do now is protect Yunoha, right?" came a quiet whisper into his ear.

"You're so noisy! Hurry up and leave. Or are you fine with being blind?"

With her arm still wrapped around Sentoor, the woman called out to Yukama.

Yukama groaned in frustration.

"Listen well, Yunoha. This country is already mine!"

"Such a stubborn geezer. Shall I go with an even stronger one this time? Far from just your eyes, this time I'll make your skin rot off."

The woman held up the can in one hand, and Yukama let out a pathetic cry. Grabbing onto his subordinates to try and escape even a second faster, he stumbled out of the room.

"Prepare thawed snow!" "Call a mystic!" "I don't care! Smoke them out! Surround this room until you can!" came Yukama's voice, each time further away than the last.

The woman let go of Sentoor's waist, and sank down into the bath.

"Thank god it ended well."

"It didn't."

Replying to the mutter of relief, Sentoor frowned and hung his head.

"Setsugen-sama… Setsugen-sama… Shitt…"

Unable to bear it, he struck out at the wall. The pain in his fist emphasised the fact that this wasn't a dream.

"Setsugen… It can't be… Setsugen…"

Princess Yunoha's faint crying voice filled the strange rectangular space.

"Ummm, I think he's okay though."

"Huh?"

Sitting in the hot water with her arms wrapped around her knees, the woman looked up at Sentoor.

"That Setsugen person, I think he's okay."

"Why do you think that…?"

He squeezed the hoarse voice out of his throat.

"Because I met him. See this? I got it from that Setsugen person."

Having a look at what the woman was pointing at, he realised that green leaves were stuck in a thin tube.

"This is, frostsnow grass?"

"Right right, I got it in a trade. That Setsugen person was inside a hut, and after talking to him for a little, he said that he didn't need to go to Zaharya any more and that he was going home. Or something like that. And at the time, I got this frostsnow grass from him. That Kak'Kenah Clan or whatever is in Zaharya, right?"

"Isn't it possible that Setsugen didn't go to Zaharya?" concluded the woman, before flicking the frostsnow grass with her finger, and making it ring out in a clear and refreshing sound.

"A hut with frostsnow grass… Could it be the mountain hut at the summit of Mt. Pirenia!? When was this? When did this happen?"

Without caring about the water, he knelt by the woman's side. Grasping the hand that was poking at the frostsnow grass and asking his question, the woman shifted uncomfortably.

"A week… Seven days ago, but?"

If they used the mountain hut seven days ago as a basis, then it was about time that he arrived in the capital.
Sentoor's eyes grew hot. Even though he hadn't cried even when his parents had died, it couldn't be…
Sentoor placed his hands on the surface beneath the water.

"Mystic-dono! Thank you. Thank you."

He bowed his head down, and his entire body submerged in the hot water. It was choking, but right now he was thankful for the water. Sentoor shed his tears in the water without anyone knowing.

"Mystic-sama, I would like to thank you as well… You've saved not just myself, but the whole of the Triht nation. No matter how much I thank you, it wouldn't be enough."

Although soaked, when Sentoor raised his head, Princess Yunoha was outside of the water, performing a bow with her fingertips on the ground.

"No, um, well, that's great… I guess. Will things be fine once Setsugen returns? That baldy is going to come again, you know?"

"No, almost all the hearts of the people of Triht belong to Setsugen. Perhaps uncle will run around and cause trouble by proclaiming that my brother is dead. But once Setsugen returns, there should be nobody who will follow Yukama."

"Then that's fine then." relaxed the woman.

"Um, what should we do until Setsugen-sama returns?"

Sentoor looked about the rectangular box that he was in. They had already been in the woman's care too much, and he wanted to return the favour

even if only a little. Enough that he would be fine with chopping the wood, cleaning the toilet, or anything like that.

“Let’s see, then for now,”

The woman stretched a hand into a box that was left in the corner, and after groping about for something, she turned back around. Her hand was grasping a transparent cylinder. The inside was filled with liquid, and a single frostsnow leaf was floating inside.

The woman let out a smile.

“Shall we drink!”

TL:
“…breath of the legendary suu’rin, an being that lived underground…”
“…breath of the suu’rin, an underground monster…”
The latter is the literal, the former is what I went with. To sum up the problem, basically in Japanese you have a lot of words that are only suitable as being expressed by the English word “monster”.
This time the word used is □□ (kaibutsu) in other words, a strange or mystical creature. It’s ***not*** *the same ‘monster’ as the one used in RPGs □□ (mamono). Neither is it the same ‘monster’ used in “B-, Bakana! Kono bakemono!” which would be □□□(bakemono).*

Chapter 5

Izumi had a headache.

Left in the changing room, the alarm clock with the broken bell indicated that the time was 1 in the afternoon.

Izumi sluggishly removed her clothes, before opening the door to the bathroom.

After inhaling the white steam, like a receding wave, for a moment the pain seemed to recede, but then it immediately returned.

Izumi was in the middle of a hangover.

She had overcome the peak when it felt like her head was going to split, but the dull pain still remained. It was like a massive temple bell was being struck inside her head.

She twisted the tap and turned on a hot shower.

Usually the hot droplets would feel gentle, but today they felt like a shower of pebbles.

Frowning and reaching out to her facial cleanser, Izumi spotted something that shone silver, and withdrew her hand in a panic.

That was dangerous.

A mist seemed to clear from her hazy head. Now that her head was thinking properly, the headache became sharper too, but quite a lot of the fault might have been because of that silver object.

Izumi looked at the silver thing――――――the sword with the sharp blade, stuck in the bucket, and let out a huge sigh.

It was last night that they had appeared outside the bathroom; the woman on the verge of suicide, and the stern man who you could tell was thick-headed at a glance.

Without catching up to what was going on, she had just saved the two, and through some strange turn of events, they had ended up having a drinking party in the bathroom.

The man whose head seemed as thick as reinforced concrete, Sentoor, had broken into sobs after just one cup, and the woman who had already emptied three of them, Yunoha, had begun lecturing Sentoor.

Apparently, “It’s all well and fine to be loyal, but there are limits to everything in the world.” “Why do you think that I’m still single at this age?” “I’ve been waiting forever for a certain someone.” “Yes, it’s the person right in front of me, you know.” “But when it comes to you, all you talk about is swords and my brother.”

Before anyone knew it, the lecture had turned into a confession, and Izumi watched this scene that unfolded thanks to the alcohol.

With Sentoor being told this much, and still having no signs of realising Yunoha’s feelings, even Izumi was beginning to feel irritated, when a cheer came from beyond the window.

“Setsugen-sama has returned!”

The moment that they heard that voice, Sentoor who had been on the verge of falling asleep immediately sprung up, and cried “Setsugen-sama~!” as he left through the window.

After cleaning up the cups, empty sake bottle, and the towels and cushions that had been sprawled across the floor, Yunoha bowed with her fingers on the floor. The whole time, she had been silent. That silent rage had given Izumi a cold sweat.

“Mystic-sama, the favour that you have shown us on this occasion, I will remember my whole life. We have been in your care.”

After giving a bow so deep that her forehead almost touched the floor, she waved the sleeves of her long clothes, and leapt through the window frame with surprising agility, leaving just like Sentoor had.

At first, Izumi had thought that Yunoha wanted to quickly check that her younger brother Setsugen was all right, but she immediately got the feeling that Yunoha had gone off to give the dullard Sentoor a good kick in the back.

Closing the window while listening to the distant cheers, Izumi only then noticed the thing that they had left behind.

It was the sword that was currently stuck through the bucket on the floor.

“What do I do.”

If she brought the sword through the door, it would probably disappear.

But the hole in the bucket wouldn’t.

The sword was sharp enough that it had stabbed through the bucket in one thrust. Would it really be alright for such a sword to vanish because she felt it was a nuisance?

Izumi looked at the window.

Would it link to Sentoor again? Or would it linked to somebody who needed the sword?

Crossing her arms in thought, outside the window became dyed in red like the setting sun.

A red light swayed before the wide-eyed Izumi. She had seen something like this before.

It was the red of a dancing blaze.

“A fire!?”

Forgetting the pain in her head, Izumi opened the window.

There was a set of western armour, dirtied with soot and ash.

“…Ahhh, so that’s what happened.”

Feeling tired, she placed a hand to the window frame.

The place with the western armour was a dim place covered in earthen walls. Apparently this was the inside of a cave.

“I do not know what it is you are assenting to on your own, but would you not happen to have a weapon of some sort, O Angel?”

“Huh?”

Izumi raised her face and looked at the armour.

“As you can see, my spear is being used as a fence, and won’t be of any use.”

Izumi bent forward through the window, and looked in the direction that the armour had indicated.

Not even a few steps away from the armour was a crack in the cave through which bright line was shining in from. And as though blocking off this entrance, a spear was stabbed into the ground. No, it wasn’t just a spear; even arrows and a bow had been used to form a barrier. Beyond the barricade in the light, was some kind of creature that dragged its heavy-looking body along the ground as it slowly walked. Seeing this caused Izumi to widen her eyes.

“What the heck is that…?”

“A *trangorn*; a type of dragon.”

Izumi stared straight at the grey creature that crawled along the ground. After getting the feeling that she had seen something similar before, Izumi realised that it was just like a Komodo monitor.

“More than a dragon, it’s more like a monitor lizard, isn’t it.”

“Can a lizard breathe fire?”

Izumi was shocked. So the flames she had seen through the glass were blown by that lizard?

“Wow, that thing can breathe fire? …Seems like you’d get forest fires all the time.”

There was nothing in the cave but mud, but she could see trees growing thickly behind the *trangorn*.

“Only the males breathe fire, and they can only do it once in their lifetime when their life is being threatened. Forest fires will not happen so casually.”

So that’s how it was.

The *trangorn* that was prowling slowly around the cave entrance suddenly turned its back to them. Izumi was wondering what it planned to do, but the answer immediately came.

The trangorn whipped its long tail against the weapons that served as a barricade.

It made a worrying sound.

“It seems that it will not hold for long.”

The armour was probably right.

With just the one strike, the bow had cracked, and a number of arrows had broken.

“At this point, anything will do. If you have anything that seems like I could use to oppose the *trangorn*, could you not lend it to me?”

Hearing the armour’s tense words, Izumi looked about the bathroom in a panic.

What came into her sight was Sentoor’s sword. It was stuck through a bucket, but it could probably be used.

“If you’re fine with the Keropii Sword, then…”

Seeing the sword that was being timidly offered, “What a creative design.” commented the armour.

When the armoured hand reached for the sword, the armour clicked his tongue.

“The spear has broken.”

The armour that had been sitting on the ground stood up, and holding the sword in a grip, he charged out.

A high-pitched sound resounded. The armour had used the Keropii Sword to deflect the sharp claws of the *trangorn*.

The armour flashed the sword in his hand, and raised it overhead, before bringing it down upon the *trangorn’s* neck with fluid movements.

-zakku-

A nimble sound, like a fork entering a cake.

The *trangorn* had thrown its head back due to the slash it had received on its back, and the sword thrust into its neck. After throwing up blood just once, the monitor-like dragon stopped moving.

When the armour gave the withdrawn sword a swing, it made the sound of cutting through wind.

Just a single swing had cleaned the blade of its blood, and the Keropii Sword returned to its original gleam.

With the sword in hand, the armour returned.

“What terrifying sharpness. Because of that, I narrowly escaped death.”

The armour sat heavily onto the cave floor.

“Angel. I apologise, but may I borrow this sword for a while longer?”

“If you’re fine with it, I’ll give it to you.”

Although the blood had been flung off, Izumi still didn’t want to touch the sword.

The armour raised his face. The blue eyes widened in joy.

“To be bestowed a sword by an angel. What fortune.”

Seeing the armour tremble in joy, Izumi knit her eyebrows before speaking.

“Umm, if you still need the sword, does it mean there are more *trangorns*?”

The armour crossed his arms.

“Indeed. There is one more. They hold territory in pairs after all. The female will probably come due to the scent of the male’s blood.”

Izumi ran her eyes over the soot-covered armour.

“But only the male breathes fire, right?”

As if she could stand fire outside her window again.

The armour nodded.

“But the truly troublesome one is the female.”

“Why?”

“The cries of the female entice humans into sleep. In accordance to the books say, I brought an orchestra so that we won’t heart the cries.”

Izumi looked here and there.

“There’s no one here you know?”

The armour let out a deep sigh.

“On the way here, there was a suspension bridge you see.”

Izumi brought her palm to her forehead. Without hearing anything else, she knew why the orchestra wasn’t here.

“The bridge couldn’t withstand the weight of the instruments, and fell.”

Just as she thought. A silence filled the dark cave.

“…So what are you going to do now? Wouldn’t it be better to escape before the female comes?”

The armour shook his head at Izumi’s suggestion.

“I was ordered by the King to bring back the heart of a female *trangorn*. Even if I lose my life, I cannot run.”

She thought that everything else only mattered because you were alive, but that was her opinion as somebody who lived in Japan.

The armour probably had his own armour-ey circumstances.

“Hey, wait there a moment.”

Izumi stood up.

She quickly dried her body and left the bathroom, before looking through the bag that she had left in the living room.

With goal in hand, she wrapped a bath towel around herself before returning to the bathroom.

She presented the thing in hand to the armour that had been gazing at the Keropii Sword.

“This is?”

“A portable music player. Put this and this into your ears.”

Although he made a puzzled expression, he obediently removed his helmet.

Silky golden hair spilled out.

He looked different to both the people of Yohk’Zai and Triht.

The white-skinned Armour with his unshaven face did as he was told, and put the earphones into his ears before looking at Izumi.

“Earplugs? But I can still hear with these.”

“No. I’ll be putting the volume up to max, so although it’ll be noisy, bear with it, okay?”

After Izumi messed with the device in her hands, Armour literally jumped up.

“What is this!?”

Seeing the earphones fall out of Armour’s ears from his shock, Izumi sighed *‘my, my’*.

“Didn’t I tell you to bear with it?”

“No, but, what is this!?”

Seeing Armour stare at the music player in apparent fear, Izumi wondered about how to reply.

To begin with, Izumi didn't know the details about how it worked either.

"It's a tool of Heaven. The singing voices of God and angels are packed into it."

Izumi decided to make use of Armour's misunderstanding that she was an angel.

"If you listen to it for a long time, your ears will go bad, but it's better than being put to sleep by the *trangorn*, right? This part is the main body, so keep it tucked in by your chest."

After looking repeatedly back and forth between Izumi and the player, Armour timidly took the earphones into his hands.

"With this, I will certainly not hear the cries of the *trangorn*."

Looking at the earphones with a frown, Armour seemed to close his eyes in determination, before putting them into his ears.

"Angel. I shall return shortly."

Izumi waved her hand at Armour who had run out of the cave.

Just how long did his 'shortly' mean?

Izumi waited pointlessly in the bath for almost an hour.

The headache that she had forgotten while speaking to Armour had returned.

She wanted to leave the bath and rest already. But she wanted to get the music player back. Recently she had been buying replacements for too many things.

Picking up a book that she had been in the middle of reading from the changing room, she returned to the bath. After thirty minutes of looking at the book without reading absorbing anything, she heard the sound of scraping armour from beyond the window.

“I am late.”

With the colour of blood mixed into the soot and mud, in the recently returned Armour’s hand was the Keropii Sword, and a bright red sack.

Seeing a liquid drip from the sack, “Hiii!” cried Izumi pathetically.

“W-, What is that!?”

She screamed, and then held her head. Her own loud voice had aggravated the pain in her head.

“Angel!? Are you all right? Are you unwell somewhere?”

Armour peered in on Izumi’s face as he knelt before the window.

“I’m just a little hung over.”

Hahahahaha! rang a cheerful laugh.

“So angels get hung over as well.”

Perhaps released from the burden due to completing his mission, Armour was in good spirits.

“Angel. Please bring that here.”

Armour pointed to the cup that came with a tooth brushing set.

“This?”

What does he need it for? Handing the cup over while tilting her head, of all things, Armour held the cup under the dripping sack.

-drip drip-

Each time the liquid dripped, the inside of the cup was dyed with red.

As Izumi’s cheek cramped, Armour held the cup out in front of her nose.

“Blood from the heart of the female. It is said to cure all ails.”

Said to be…? An oral tradition?

“No, I’ll be fine after I sleep. I don’t really need to drink it.”

When Izumi pushed the cup back, Armour began to insist ever more strongly.

“I suppose you doubt its efficacy. I was the same. I gave it a try on the way back. The burns from before healed, you know.”

Armour held out his chest proudly, before bringing his eyebrows together and smiling.

“Because of you, Angel, I was able to defeat the *trangorn*. No matter how small it may be, I wish to return the favour.”

Seeing his sad smile and having all that said to her, Izumi couldn’t refuse.

She took the cup and brought it near her face. With just a sniff, she felt like she was going to puke, but she held her breath and drank.

Just one sip.

That was her limit.

With watery eyes, she left the cup on the rim of the bathtub, and rinsed her mouth out with the shower.

After gargling countless times, Izumi noticed; the pain in her head had disappeared. Not just that, her body felt strangely light.

“It’s healed.”

When she turned back to the window, Armour broke into a grin.

“Of course. …Speaking of which, Angel, could you spare me just a little water? I want to return your “Portable Music Player” but my hands are

dirty.”

Izumi splashed the hot water in the bucket over Armour’s arms. After doing it a second, and then a third time, the blood finally came off, and Armour reached into his breast and brought out the player.

“You have truly helped me. With this, I am a hero.”

Armour muttered this sadly, after dropping the white device into Izumi’s palm.

It was a voice much too unsuited to a person who had carried out his mission, and had a bright future as a hero awaiting him.

“Aren’t you happy?”

“I *am* happy. …Only, if the wife that I left in my hometown congratulated me as well, just how much happier would I be, I wonder.”

What a strange man. Izumi frowned.

“Can’t you just get congratulated after you return there?”

“I can no longer return.”

“Why?”

“When I return with the lifeblood of the *trangorn*, I am to become the chief of the capital’s knights.”

Izumi looked at Armour coldly.

“In other words, you chose status over your wife? It’s your life, so I’m not going to reproach you or anything, but isn’t it too shameless for you to lament then?”

At this point, Izumi tilted her head in wonder.

“Or rather, can’t you just call your wife to the capital?”

A beloved wife, and an honourable position. Wouldn't he have everything?

Armour dropped his shoulders and sighed. His large body seemed shockingly little.

"It won't work. My wife became fed up with me, and I was driven from home."

"Eh? Why?"

Izumi thought that he had become fixated on honour and abandoned his wife, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"I was originally the leader of a poor knight brigade in my hometown in the countryside. I may be saying this myself, but I was known as the most skilled person in the frontiers, and my knights idolised me. I took a girl that was my childhood friend as my wife, and we lived a meagre but happy life. At that point, a message came from the capital. I was told to become the captain of a *trangorn* subjugation squad."

"Mn mn." hummed Izumi to prompt his next words, as she quietly lent him and ear.

"I refused. My wife does not have a strong body. I did not want to leave her behind and go on a dangerous *trangorn* subjugation mission. Although my heart was shaken by the position of Knight Captain in the capital, it was nothing compared to the modest life with my wife. The messengers pretend to give up, and held me a feast. They said things about celebrating my normal work, and skilful excuses like that, you see. And I completely bought into it."

Armour covered his face with armoured hand, before hanging his head.

"Before I knew it, I was sleeping in a brothel. …Completely nude."

Uwahh.

"My wife wouldn't forgive me. I was driven out with only the clothes on my back, and arrived where I am right now."

“We hadn’t even been married for three months. Even though we were newlyweds…” muttered Armour dejectedly. He didn’t look anything like a warrior skilled enough to lead a knight brigade, but that was probably how much he loved his wife. It sounded like an idiot story from an outsider’s point of view, but it was probably nothing but a tragedy for the person himself.

“I found out later, but apparently I was a distant relative of the King. Because of that, they were fixated on me. Apparently it would be convenient for them if a relative of the King returned with a *trangorn* heart as a hero.”

Armour’s gloomy sigh resounded through the cave.

Izumi hesitantly opened her mouth.

“If I, just an ‘if’, okay? But, *if* I happen to meet your wife, I’ll try speaking to her. It was the King’s messenger, so you couldn’t help it, right? And as for the brothel, that couldn’t be helped, or rather, you fell into a trap. Well, I don’t know who this window will link to, so don’t hope for too much though.”

Armour feebly raised his head.

“No, I was in the wrong for lowering my guard… Thank you, O Angel.”

Standing up with the sword, and the sack that apparently had a heart in it, Armour forced a smile.

“I feel better now that I’ve told my story. From now on, I shall climb the ranks as far as I can climb.”

“I have been in your care.” said Armour, before turning and leaving, but his retreating back seemed brimmed with grief.

Chapter 6

Cough.

While having a light coughing fit, she opened the door to the now unused room.

It had already been a month since its owner had disappeared, but the inside was kept the same as the day he left.

The jacket hung on the chair, the leather armour and training sword leaning against the wall, the quill left lying atop the table, the worn shoes by the side of the bed. It was a waste to even clean the mud from the boots, so she left them as they were.

When she came here, it felt like she could meet him whenever she wanted.

“Utaseyu.” It felt like he would call her name like that, before gently embracing her.
It felt like he would tell her silly jokes to make her laugh.

Utaseyu approached the bed, and softly sat down.

“I’m too big, so I’m scared that I’ll crush you when I sleep.” he had once told her, so they slept in separate rooms.

Although she felt it a little lonely, Utaseyu agreed as well.

It wouldn’t have done to wake him up with her coughing in the middle of the night, so she was very grateful for the idea.

Utaseyu lay down atop the mattress, before pushing her face into the pillow.

She had placed a few bags of *hahanero* around so that she wouldn't need to wash it, but his scent had long disappeared.

Finding it sad, Utaseyu let out a sigh.

How long had she been doing that?

Recalling the reason for her visit her, Utaseyu raised her sluggish body.

She stood by the window and tied the blinds up.

When she reached her arm out, she coughed again.

The reason it hurt less than usual was probably due to the rain that fell last night.

Small panes of glass were held in the wooden lattice frame of the window, which was an item specially ordered from the Capital. It's clarity was high, and you could see the outside scenery without distortion.

He had ordered them from a workshop in the Capital for their future children. Even at the cost of putting off replacements for his worn boots and saddle.

She undid the lock and placed her hands against the window frame. And although she hadn't even pushed, the window opened.

Utaseyu was lost for words.

Even though the outside greenery had been beyond the window until a moment ago, standing there right now was a woman she had never seen before.

She had honey-coloured skin, and glossy black hair that gleamed like like a *croshinshu*. Looking carefully, even her eyes were black.

Recalling a black-eyed demon from a picture book she read as a child, Utaseyu flinched.

But she immediately regained her senses, and smiled.

Ahh, so it's time.

"I have been waiting for you, Angel."

The angel stared with her mouth hanging.

"You were? For me?"

"Yes."

It seems that the angel was surprised. "Well this is new." she muttered.

She supposed that not everybody was prepared when the angel came calling.

"I have been prepared for a long time now."

"Eh? For what?"

"Eh?"

"Eh?"

Utaseyu stared at the angel's black eyes for a while.

The angel was looking back at her too.

"Um, did you not come here to pick me up?"

"Pick you up? Me?"

Their conversation was mismatched.

Utaseyu stared hard at the angel.

She had black eyes and hair that Utaseyu had never seen before, and was wearing an outfit of mysterious material.

Utaseyu could see what was behind the angel; she had thought for sure that the smooth yellow wall was a wall of heavenly judgement that only those allowed into heaven through, but perhaps she was wrong.

The angel frowned.

“Sorry. Because the weather was good, I opened the window to ventilate, so it seems that I’m not the person you’ve been waiting for.”

“My, was that how it was.”

Utaseyu’s shoulders slumped.

The news of him splendidly completing his mission had reached her.

As promised, he rose to the position of Knight Captain for the knight brigade in the Capital.

That’s why she had thought that it would be fine to leave whenever, but…

Now that he had become a hero, he would probably be courted by plenty of the refined ladies in the Capital.

She had wanted to depart before she heard news of him picking somebody.

The tears that she thought had dried up began to fill the brim of her eyes.

And then a drop ran down her cheek.

“Eh? Um, w-, what’s wrong?”

The angel frowned in bewilderment.

“I apologise for showing an unsightly… Guh-!”

When Utaseyu tried to wipe her tears, the moment she covered her eyes, a dull pain shot through her chest, and the taste of blood filled her mouth.

She tightly gripped the clothing by her chest, and crouched.

She couldn’t breathe, and sweat gathered at her forehead.

This pain that felt like a mortar grinding her insides was something that she had experienced many times already.

“Hey, are you okay!?”

The angel leant forward from the gate to heaven.

She felt like she was choking. The sweat ran into her eyes and blurred her vision.

And then, something raw smelling was thrust before her eyes.

“Here, drink this! It smells bad enough to kill, but anyway, just drink it!”

With her consciousness starting to blur, she reached out her hand to the thing offered by the angel. But her hands were shaking, and she couldn’t grasp it.

“Sorry if it spills!”

Perhaps panicking, the angel forced something to Utaseyu’s mouth.

A thick, warm liquid spread through her mouth. It certainly did taste dreadful.

It spilled from the corners of her mouth to her throat, before dripping down to her clothing.
A smell like rotten *tamanekki* boiled with *ninik* assaulted her nose, and Utaseyu gagged.

“Ghho-, goho-, u-”

Feeling sick, she quickly covered her mouth.

After somehow managing to force it back down her throat, Utaseyu looked at the angel.

“Uu-, ggho-, geho-,”

The angel seemed nauseated too.

“What was that just now?”

After waiting for the angel’s nausea to settle, Utaseyu questioned the angel.

“Trangorn blood.”

The angel twisted a white knob, and water came flowing from a silver pipe. While washing her hands, the angel answered exhaustedly.

“…Trangorn.”

Utaseyu’s eyes widened.

“Why do you have trangorn blood?”

“Somebody gave it to me. A person in armour. Or more like, he forced it onto me, and this is what I had left…”

After the blood came off her hands, the angel smelt her palms before grimacing.

“The smell isn’t coming off… Hey, I think you should hurry and change too.”

“Um, the name of the person in armour was…?”

It couldn’t be. she thought. But Utaseyu’s heart was trembling from expectation.

“Name? Ah!!”

After tilting her head, the vigorously stood up.

“I didn’t ask for his name! Aaah, I’ve done it now. Even if I meet his wife now I won’t even know!”

No less vigorously than the angel, Utaseyu got up as well.

“Angel. Could you please wait a moment? I will return immediately!”

“As long as it isn’t for an hour and a half, sure?”

Looking at Utaseyu, startled, the angel sat down on a small yellow chair.

Utaseyu ran. She vigorously took the portrait in the guest room into her hands, and returned to the room where the angel was waiting.

Although it had been a few years since she had run this much, oddly her chest wasn’t hurting, and she wasn’t short of breath at all.

“Angel! This person! Was it this person that you met!?”

It was a picture of him in knight clothing――――a picture of the man who had been Utaseyu’s husband.

Blonde hair and blue eyes like a deep lake. His fearless and prudent countenance had won not only her heart, but the admiration and longing of all members of his knight brigade.

“Ah, right right. It was him.”

The angel gave a light nod.

Seeing the portrait, her black eyes widened.

“Hey, could it be that you’re his wife!?”

Utaseyu smiled. A little sadly.

“Ex-… though.”

The angel reached out her arms from the gate, and took both of Utaseyu’s hands.

“I wanted to meet you!”

“Eh?”

Utaseyu fell into confusion.

The angel said that she hadn’t come to meet her.

But the angel said that she had wanted to meet her.

“So you really have come to pick me up?”

“Umm, for a while now, what have you been saying about picking you up? …It couldn’t be that you thought I was here to bring a dead person to heaven, right?”

Utaseyu nodded. The church had taught that it was the angels’ job to detach the souls of the dead from this world.

“Am I a shinigami…?”

The angel gave a tired sigh.

After releasing Utaseyu’s hands from her fingers, the angel corrected her posture.

“Listen carefully, okay? I met the person in the portrait by chance, and heard a lot of things from him. He said he wanted to celebrate the slaying of the trangorn with you. He told me that living together with you was important to him. He really regrets it, you know. And umm, hey, about, you know…”

The angel’s eyes swam as she found something difficult to say.

“About how he went to a brothel?”

“Y-, Yeah. About how he was sleeping naked in a brothel. That might be how things ended up, but it seems that it wasn’t his intention. The messenger from the king made him drink until he was drunk, so I think he was completely unconscious, you know.”

“I knew that he had gone to a brothel, but I didn’t know that he slept there naked.”

The angel wordlessly held her forehead.

“But I know that nothing happened.”

The angel suddenly raised her face.

Utaseyu gave a small chuckle.

“After all, when he gets drunk, he becomes ‘useless’ after all.”

After saying so, Utaseyu’s cheeks flushed red. What a thing to have said to a pure angel.

Hahaha, laughed the angel as she scratched her cheek.

“I’m sorry. What a thing to talk to an angel about.”

“No, it’s fine, but umm, hmmm, was it unforgivable to you that he stepped into a brothel?”

Utaseyu shook her head.

“No, after all, a messenger from the King isn’t somebody that you can refuse a drink from. I knew that he had been tricked somehow.”

Then why…? the angel seemed to frown in confusion.

Utaseyu brought her hand to her chest.

“I don’t have long to live. Right after we got married, I had my first attack when he was out subjugating monsters. At the time, the doctor had told this to me. That I probably wouldn’t last another year. He would laugh and say that he wanted children, so I couldn’t tell him. And then the messenger from the Capital came and said that after subjugating the trangorn, he would be promoted to Captain of the Capital’s knights. But he refused. For my sake…”

Tears had begun to flow down her cheeks before she had noticed. She felt pathetic for doing nothing but holding him back. She felt resentment towards the body that wouldn't do as she wanted.

"He's amazing, you know. No matter what the monster, he would defeat it in one blow. Did you see him wield his sword? Wasn't it beautiful? He isn't somebody who should spend his life hidden in the countryside like this. But despite that, he was going to refuse… Even though I was going to die soon."

When Utaseyu happened to raise her head, she found that the angel was watching her with a sour expression.

"Angel?"

When Utaseyu called out to her, the angel suddenly returned to her senses.

Seeing Utaseyu with her head tilted in confusion, the angel gave Utaseyu a difficult smile.

"How do I say this. I think maybe you two should have talked to each other a little more."

Is that so? But if I spoke to him, then he definitely would have stayed here.

When she thought about how much he would grieve after her death, Utaseyu just couldn't bear it.

"Also, you're probably fine now."

"Eh?"

Utaseyu tilted her head in confusion. what was fine now?

"It was trangorn blood. A panacea. All it did was cure my hangover, but your husband said that it healed his burns. And from what I can see, it looks like your attacks have stopped too, but, how do you feel? Doesn't your body feel lighter?"

"…Ah."

Utaseyu looked down at her body in shock.

She wasn't struggling to breathe at all. The dull pain that had always plagued her, as well as the feeling of being grinded was gone as well.

"Am I, healed?"

"Probably."

"Am I, not going to die anymore?"

"No, the illness you had is healed, but I think everybody is going to die someday… For me as well; once I drank again, I got another hangover after all.

"Am I going to be able to bear his child?"

"Ummm, were you listening to me? But well, yeah, I guess you probably can."

The feeling of new tears filling her eyes was a terribly comfortable one.

Utaseyu sobbed in happiness.

"Umm, well then, that's how it is, so, I think it'd be best for you to hurry to the capital. I'm sure the armoured man is waiting for you."

The angel put her hand against the door.

Utaseyu suddenly came back to her senses and took the angel's hand.

"Please wait. Please, please let me thank you."

The angel tilted her head, looking troubled.

"Um, I was beginning to think that it was about time that I don't get anything left behind, but…"

“Please. Won’t you allow me to thank you somehow?”

With Utaseyu almost clinging to her arm, the angel muttered “like husband, like wife, huh”.

“Hmmmm, then…”

The angel looked around the room.

“I’ve been wondering for a while now, but what are those round cloths on top of your mattress?”

“The *hahaneros*?”

Utaseyu picked up a *hahanero* bag that she had created by sewing a number of *hahaneros* into a brightly coloured cloth.

“Yeah, yeah. what’s a *hahanero*? Why do you have them spread out on top of your bed?”

“They’re a very hot spice, but when you grind them up and put them inside a cloth like this, they become insect repellants that prevent moulding.”

“Incidentally, they can be used as beanbags for children as well, you see.” she said, and the angel’s eyes sparkled.

“They prevent moulding!? That! I want that.”

“Are you fine with something like this? Then please take them all.”

To think that there would be mould in heaven.

Utaseyu felt just a little dejected.

It was apparently quite a different place than in the church’s teachings.

Chapter 7

Red, pink, yellow and green. These small and vibrant beanbags were made from lots of small cloth pieces sewn together, and when you tossed them they would roll in a dizzying array of colours.
Normally, even simply playing with beanbags would feel more difficult when you were sitting in a bath, with hot water up past your waist.
There were six hahanero beanbags. When Izumi had heard that they would prevent mould she eagerly chose them, but her shoulders were now drooped in realisation of her own thoughtlessness. Although the hahanero was dried, they were still ground spices. Izumi realised that a bathroom would immediately fill with moisture. She had considered preserving them in something airtight, but then that would be meaningless. Prepared for one of them to become ruined, she left it in a bucket, but fortunately, right now it still felt the same as always.
It was about time to try adding another one.

Just as she was about to put another beanbag in, the moment she reached out for the bucket, the window quietly opened.

On her seventh try, the shock had become weak.

Feeling something akin to *'This again?'*, Izumi looked towards the window.

Brown hair that reached past the shoulders, and mysteriously coloured purple-grey eyes; there stood a child with an androgyny that made them seem like both a boy and a girl.

A medallion that hung from the neck to the stomach now shone in reflection of the bathroom light.

The child surveyed the bathroom with terribly cold eyes, looked at Izumi, and then scoffed.

“A witch, huh. You are too far past your prime to tempt me. Try again.”

“HAHH!?”

With the beanbag in her hand, Izumi stood up.

“Who the heck is supposed to be a witch. Even if somebody begged me I wouldn’t tempt a cheeky brat like you.”

“A sore loser huh. What manner of being could invade this tower but a witch.”

“A company employee!”

Seeing the sneering child――――who was apparently a boy――――Izumi threw out her chest and answered. And then came back to her senses.

No matter how detestable child a he might have been, her appearance was unacceptable. Izumi looked down at her own body and paled.

The first time she had been in such shock at having her window connected to some strange world that she didn’t really feel embarrassed. The second time she was wearing clothing, and as for the third time, although she felt a little self-conscious she immediately broke past it. After all, they were all people she would never see again. There wasn’t any real problem in being seen. That was how she had begun to feel. But when it came to a child, that was a different matter. As an adult who ought to be setting a role-model, it was embarrassing to be standing chest high, legs apart in the nude.

“H-, Hang on a little.”

Leaving the beanbag on the windowsill, she headed into the changing room.

After wrapping a bath towel around her body and hurriedly heading back to the bathroom, she found that the boy had taken the beanbag in hand and was staring at it curiously.

“…Do you like it?”

The boy suddenly averted his gaze from the beanbag.

“Of course not.”

Really?
Even as he spat out “Who would like *this kind of thing*?” he still held onto it tightly.

“If you want it, I’ll give it to you. As an apology for surprising you.”

Saying that while sitting on the edge of the bathtub, she was glared at by the boy.

“I wasn’t surprised.”

It was true that when they saw each other, the boy hadn’t shown a surprised expression. Izumi inwardly praised the boy’s firm guts for not being surprised despite a naked woman suddenly appearing.

Although the boy’s navy jacket was a little dirty, it was finely embroidered. From that, you could tell at a glance that it was probably expensive. Even the shirt beneath was decently strong, and gleamed like silk. He was also wearing form-fitting beige pants, and high-laced leather boots. It was an outfit like that of a noble boy from long ago.

Izumi returned her gaze to the boy’s face.

“Well, isn’t it fine? I still have some, so I’ll give you that one.”

“And what do you want in exchange? My lifespan? My seed?”

Izumi winced at the boy’s scornful gaze.

“I told you that I wasn’t a witch, didn’t I. What the heck do you mean ‘seed’? Hurry up and drop that kind of idea already.”

“Look, I’m not even naked any more.” she said, as she pointed at the towel. The boy snorted again.

“Aren’t you only covering your breast and waist.”

“No, well, yeah you’re right but… I’m covering all the places that need covering, so isn’t it fine…”

Mumbling a reply, Izumi realised that she was a disadvantage, so her gaze loitered around behind the boy instead.

The first thing that entered her vision was the huge number of paper rolls around the room. Some stuffed in a basket, some leant against the wall, some laying on the floor. The boy’s room was filled with them.

The next thing she noticed was the light that illuminated those papers. When she bent forward and looked up to find the source of it, she found that about three meters up the wall were countless 10cm rectangular holes. Turning her gaze even further up, she saw a dome-shaped ceiling.

When she looked back down again, Izumi sighed in wonder. The entire room, ceiling included, had been built from stone. The stone became larger and larger the further down they were, and by the time it reached the floor, the stones were easily larger than a person could hold.

There was a large, thick desk in the middle of the room, as well as chests and benches lined up by the wall. Beneath their feet was a rug of complicated and detailed designs, and although it was showy, it brought about a solid sense of dignity to the room.

There was a large black hole at the edge of the carpet. Looking closely, Izumi realised that they were stairs that led to the lower floors.

Izumi’s heart danced with excitement at this room that gave the feeling of being in an ancient castle.

“What are you thinking, smirking like that, you damned witch.”

Izumi looked at the boy who had sunk her exhilarated heart to ground with just his one line.

Catching sight of the beanbag in his hand, Izumi snickered.

Stretching her hand into the bucket, she picked up two beanbags.

“I got these beanbags the other day. Do you know how to play with them?”

“I don’t.” brusquely replied the boy. In her mind, Izumi pumped her fist in victory.

“Big sis will show you how.”

Like this, showed Izumi, as she tossed the beanbag above her head. While the beanbag was in the air, she moved the other beanbag from her left hand to her right, before throwing that in the air as well. After Izumi repeated this a number of times, she called out to the boy.

“I wonder if you can do it too,” she said in a babying voice. “It looks easy, but it’s difficult until you know the trick to it, you know.”

The boy turned sullen, and looked at the beanbag resting on his palm.

“Aren’t you just tossing it. I can do that much.”

Just as he said, the boy tossed the beanbag into the air. Despite that, or perhaps just as expected, the beanbag went too high, and while the boy was focused on catching it, he did nothing with the beanbag in his left hand.

“Hohohohoho,” resounded Izumi’s laughter. “You really are just tossing it huh. There’s no point in having two of them in that case.”

The boy wordlessly tossed the beanbag into the air again. This time to a good height. But when he tried to move the beanbag from his left hand to his right, it fell.

“Seee? It’s difficult, isn’t it. Shall I tell you the trick to it?”

Izumi crossed her arms, and leant on the windowsill.

“Unnecessary.”

The boy once again tossed the beanbag. He managed both the right height, and the move from his left hand to his right. He managed to catch the falling beanbag in his left hand too. But he stopped there.

“Oh? you did it. But there’s no point if you stop there.” said Izumi sarcastically.

“I’ll show you this time.”

The boy had completely taken it seriously.

He tossed a beanbag, and changed another from his left hand to his right. Catching the first in his left hand, he tossed up the one in his right. After clumsily repeating it a number of times, in no time, his movements began to become smooth.

“How’s this.”

Seeing the boy declare so triumphantly, Izumi bore with the urge to burst into laughter.

“Still a long way to go. Next is doing it with one hand.”

Izumi tossed and caught two beanbags with her right hand.

The boy tried imitating her, and tossed the beanbag.

Although it took more time than last time, the boy had mastered it one-handed, and was now tossing them easily.

Izumi began adding beanbags from the bucket.

“Next is three.”

Izumi tossed them carefully so that they wouldn't fall in the bath. The beanbags flew into the air, one by one. Just how many years had it been since she had enjoyed herself by doing this seriously? She recalled how as a child she became frustrated with it, and single-mindedly practising.

Seeing the sore loser of a boy struggle with three beanbags, Izumi was finally unable to bear it, and burst into laughter.

A beanbag flew from the hand of the surprised boy, and fell into the table.

He glared at Izumi.

"What's so amusing?"

"No, it's just that at first I thought you weren't like a child at all, but when you're playing like that, you really are a child, huh."

For a moment, the boy's glare intensified. But then he immediately looked towards the fallen beanbag, and suddenly laughed.

"Witches sure have a lot of spare time, huh. You came all the way here to play with me? What's fun about playing with children?"

His words were harsh, but his tone had softened quite a bit.

"It seems like the third will take a while for me."

The boy picked up the beanbag from atop the table. In that moment, a paper that had been spread over the table fell to the ground.

Drifting left and right as it fell, it flew close to the window, and Izumi hurriedly caught it. It would be terrible for it to fall in the bath.

"This dropped."

Seeing the paper as she was about to hand it to the boy, Izumi's eyes widened.

"This is…"

“It’s a map, and…?”

The boy tilted his head.

Izumi paid no heed to the boy’s puzzled gaze, and looked hard at the paper in her hands.

On the paper was something like a fat and rounded cross. The cross itself was broken into various parts, with words written on it.

“What an interesting shape. Hey, whereabouts is this place on the map?”

The boy peered in on the map.

“If I said that we were in Ii’Jibro, would you understand?”

“Nope, not at all.”

The boy looked at Izumi, dumbfounded.

“Are witches unable to read maps?” he asked, as he pointed to a red portion, a little distance below the middle of the cross.

“Ii’Jibro is this red portion.”

“I see.” nodded Izumi.

If each colour represented a nation, then it made this quite an extensive map.

In that case, there might be some of the countries that she knew. Izumi dug out from her memory the names of the countries spoken by the people she had met.

“Is Yohk’Zai on the map?”

“Here,” pointed the boy, to a spot to Ii’Jibro’s upper-right. It was close by.

“Huhu.” laughed Izumi, as she recalled Teo Keh’s large belly. She wondered if he managed to meet the stranded man in blue.

“What about Triht?”

Following with another question, the boy plucked out the map from Izumi’s hand.

“Hey!” she complained. “I still wanted to look. What are you doing?”

As though finding it troublesome, the boy spoke as he rolled up the map.

“Stand up, and stretch out your arms.”

“Eh?”

“I’ll teach you how to remember the map. Just stand up and spread your arms.”

It wasn’t like she particularly wanted to learn geography.

But since he was willing to teach her, and she couldn’t think of any reason to refuse, Izumi stood up in the bath and spread both arms.

“Listen up. Your right breast is Yohk’Zai. Your neck is Triht, and your head is the country ruled by the dragons, and the country rumoured to be a paradise, Jebas. Under your right breast near your liver is Ii’Jibro. Crowded near your left breast are a lot of small countries. Near the biceps of your right arm is Insen, from your elbow to your wrist is Uchu, and your hand is Kouzen. Your left bicep is Sunayu, and from your left elbow to your wrist is Dohji. And then…”

“Wait!”

With the boy continuing on and on, Izumi asked him to stop.

“It’s impossible, I can’t remember all that. I’m fine just knowing where Yohk’Zai and Triht are.”

They were all the names of completely unfamiliar countries after all. Izumi's hippocampus was already screaming in defeat.

The boy laughed.

"You're quite different from the witches in the legends. Are you really a witch?"

Apparently the laughing boy didn't hear Izumi say "No, like I said, I'm not a witch.".

After laughing for a while, the boy walked to the wall and tossed the map into one of the baskets.

The light coming in from above had changed to the light of the evening.

The stone room was wrapped in a dim red light, and gave warmth to the cold and inorganic stones.

If she was a witch, then the boy walking through the rays of light was like a fairy, thought Izumi.

"What an elegant room. Did you say this was a tower?"

The boy nodded at Izumi's murmur.

"Indeed. People call it the Tower of the Silent Sinner."

"…That's quite the name."

Since the name seemed to have quite a background, Izumi's face stiffened.

Now that she had heard the name, she couldn't help but see this elegant castle room as a prison to cage in a criminal. But for a prison, its furnishings were much too luxurious. After tilting her head in wonder for a while, Izumi muttered "Ahh." and nodded. If she took this to be a prison to cage in those of high status, then everything fit. For example, like the boy in front of her…

“Could it be that you’re imprisoned in here?”

She wanted him to deny it. There was no way she could overlook something as cruel as imprisoning a child in a tower. But Izumi had no power to help him. Even if she sheltered him on her side, his prison would just be changed to this small bathroom instead.

“Indeed.”

Izumi’s hopes were easily betrayed.

The boy nodded as though it were no big deal.

“Did you commit some sort of wrongdoing? And so they locked you up here for a day?” asked Izumi, hoping for the best.

“It’s almost been a year since I was put in here.”

Izumi didn’t know what to say any more.

A small laugh reached Izumi’s ears as she hung her head.

She raised her face to find that the boy was looking at her with a self-mocking smile, unsuited for a child his age.

“I was unable to stop my father from marrying a woman who hid her ugliness and desire under her beauty, and following his death, my step-mother easily took the power from me. I suppose you could say that was my wrongdoing.”

She knew why he was so calm now.

He had surely experienced a harsh life that she couldn’t even imagine. No, even now, he was in the middle of that kind of life. Even though he was still a child young enough to take juggling seriously, he was hurriedly trying to grow up.

“Don’t you have any way to leave here? If there’s anything I can help with…”

Izumi cut her words short. Even if he did escape, wouldn't it just be endangering his life?

The boy looked up at the sky, through the tiny, tiny holes.

"Long ago, back in Ii'Jibro's most prosperous era, the king in those days, the Wise King, was said to have created this tower. One day, the strong and intelligent king was out in town when he heard a beautiful singing voice. The owner of the voice was a beautiful girl, and the king had his heart taken by her at first sight. But the girl had both husband and child. The girl refused the king, and the king flew into a rage. He killed the husband, took the children, and created a tower to imprison the girl. So that the girl was unable to escape, he locked the tower, and always kept the key by him. Since the day she was imprisoned in the tower, in her deep sadness, the girl never let out a single sound. But the king didn't try to understand the girl's grief. Each day he came to the tower to visit the beloved girl, and he neglected his duties as a king. Ii'Jibro was on the road to decline… There are theories that in the end the king killed the girl and ended his own life, as well as theories about the children coming to save their mother. The key that the foolish king kept with him is this one."

The boy held up the medallion hanging from his neck. The sounds of the thin chain rang out.

"Eh? That's the key? Why do you have it?"

"In the days of the Wise King, they had techniques far beyond our current ones. Locking the door doesn't require the key. The only key is this one, and you can only unlock it from outside. She probably wanted me to taste despair. Before that woman closed the door, she smiled and threw this in at me. Even if my step-mother dies, I won't ever be able to step outside again."

"That can't be…"

Izumi looked up at the hole above her.

"What about that hole!?"

The boy shook his head.

“The key is larger. It’s impossible.”

“What about your food? You’ve been stuck here for a whole year, so there should be a window or door for the food, right?”

“Why do you think all the books here are curled up?”

Izumi caught her breath.

“…Because the only holes are small enough that only curled paper can go through?”

It felt to Izumi like the boy nodded in slow motion.

How cruel. What a cruel thing to do with a child like this.

“My life here isn’t bad enough to grieve about. I have a water well downstairs, and there is sewage disposal as well. I have meals brought to me three times a day, and as you can see I have books to kill time.”

If only it hadn’t been impossible to leave the bathroom, then the boy could have lived freely, even if in a different world…
Izumi stood there wordlessly. And then the boy suddenly took the key from his neck.

“Witch. Come a little closer.”

Izumi did as she was told.

The boy passed Izumi’s neck through the chains with the key.

“I had fun. This is my thanks.”

Before Izumi could tell him to wait, the boy shut the window.

Chapter 8

The screeches of the pickaxe stopped.
The shock of the impact transmitted from the tool to his arms, and Rubar's eyes dyed with the colour of despair.
It was over.
It was all over.
The pickaxe that he had grasped every night for a year now felt heavy in its loss of meaning.
It dropped from his stiffened fingers.
Azayu called out from behind.

"…Let's get out of here, Rubar. We'll think of the next plan."

Next plan?
As if there was such a thing.
They didn't even know how the massive stones of the tower were put together. It was said that removing just one stone could cause the entire thing to collapse; that was the Tower of the Silent Sinner. Who could have imagined that the stones continued even underground.
Firm fingers held onto the silent Rubar.

"What are you going to do by staying here. The Prince is in the tower, bearing with it all by himself, you know!"

Although Azayu had to have known what the earlier screech meant, the willpower had not left his voice.
Had this not been a tunnel too low to stand, his fist would certainly have flown at Rubar's face.
Each time Rubar complained, Azayu would scold him.
Sometimes they would cry together. Sometimes they would fight. And together they had come this far.

It was by toadying up to the foolish nobles that hung around Queen Akka, and by staining his own honour as a general that Azayu was now here.

“Sorry. You’re right.”

Strength returned to Rubar’s eyes and Azayu smiled in relief.
Rubar had, these men had, over the past year dug again and again.
The moonstone in Rubar’s helmet illuminated the tunnel.
While glancing at the clumsily made reinforcement beams, Rubar tried to cheer himself up.
None of them had ever dug a tunnel before. It was all a work of trial and error. At first it felt impossible. But in the end, they had made it as far as the tower. Because it was surrounded by stone he hadn’t managed to rescue the Prince. But they had still made it as far as the tower. No matter what the obstacle, nothing would begin unless you gave it a try.
This was the last time he would see this place.
Rubar engraved the sight into his heart.
At the dead-end, Rubar could hear the sound of bellows overhead. It was the sound of the Head Chef of the barracks sending air into the tunnel for them.
Upon climbing up the ladder, the man’s round face greeted them with a smile.

“Rubar-sama, Azayu-sama, thank you for your hard work.”

This chef was a precious companion who had toiled through pains and joys together with them. Whenever Rubar left the dark and stifling tunnel, this man’s affable smile had always given him relief.
But today alone, Rubar instead widened his eyes in shock.
There was a kitchen table in front of the Head Chef, and above it shone a rectangle. Within it was a room illuminated by orange light wherein cried a woman wrapped in a white cloth.

“…Is this a dream? Or is this an illusion?”

“No, I can see it too, Rubar.”

Azayu muttered a reply.
Although he was a man who few things could perturb, right now his voice was hoarse.
The quietly crying woman noticed their voices, and raised her gaze to meet them.
The moment he saw her dark eyes, Rubar stiffened. It brought to mind the bedtime tales his mother had told him as a child, and the witch that appeared in them.
In Ii'Jibro, all children grow up being told *"If you do bad things, the witch's companions will take you away, you know?"*. During the years until he realised it was just a tale to discipline children, Rubar had been terrified of the witch and strove to be a better child than anybody else.
He already knew a long time ago that there was no such thing as a witch.
But despite that, to think that she actually really did…
The witch's drowsy eyes looked at Rubar, and then at Azayu.
Her tightened lips told of her bad mood.
The witch opened her mouth.

"Oooi, you lot drink as well."

Rubar reflexively covered his nose.
The witch stank too strongly of liquor.

"What the hell is with this drunkard witch…"

He had been taught that the witch was an eerie woman clad in tattered black clothing. Her eyes supposedly shone in the dark, and at night she would go from house to house and collect the bad children across the country. When she found a naughty child, she would lock them up in the gourd at her waist. She was supposed to be a terrifying person like that.
He had never heard of a half-naked witch grumbling over her drink.
The dumbfounded Rubar moved towards the Head Chef. And when he did, the chef took a cup from the kitchen table, and held it out to Rubar. His breath smelt a little of liquor.

"Head Chef… You're drinking too?"

"Hehe," laughed the chef. "This wine is pretty good."

“It’s wine with frostsnow grass. Course it’s good. Come on, you lot drink too.”

The witch reached out with her honey-coloured arm, and began pouring liquor into the cup that the Head Chef had forced on him.
Rubar looked down at the cup filled to the brim.
Unlike the fruit wines he knew, this liquor was clear like water and didn’t smell acidic either. He gulped. Having been in the dry and dusty tunnel, his throat longed for it. But because it was a witch’s wine, he couldn’t drink it without hesitation.
Suddenly he heard a bang.
Raising his head, he found the witch’s clenched fist on the kitchen table.

“What’s with you. You don’t want to drink my wine? That’s finee, that’s finee. I’m just an idiot woman who couldn’t save a single child after all.”

Just as he thought she was angry, the witch started to bawl instead.
Rubar was bewildered.
Azayu lined up beside him.

“Lost her child, huh… Although she’s a witch, still, how pitiful.”

The witch’s teary eyes glared at Azayu.

“HAHH!? I didn’t lose anything!”

And so she went back to being angry. What an energetic witch.
Learning forward, she grabbed Azayu’s collar.

“Or rather, just now you implied that I had a kid, didn’t you. DO I LOOK OLD ENOUGH TO HAVE A KID TO YOU!?”

“…My apologies.”

He apologised with an entirely bewildered expression.
The witch then hung her head.

“It’s fine. It’s fine, you know. I’m not worth apologising to.”

Having gone back to crying once more, the witch started shaking Azayu by the collar.
Just as he raised his hands to pull her off, Azayu frowned. He was probably hesitating to touch her bare shoulders. How very like the serious Azayu.
Due to the same problem, Rubar was troubled with how to remove her from Azayu and ended up just standing there.
As he was being shaken by the witch as she pleased, the helmet slid from his swaying head. It hit the kitchen table with a clank, before bouncing into the witch's dwelling.
They heard the sound of water.
When Rubar timidly tried to peer in, her black eyes fixated on him.

"Hey, what are you peeking at. Pervert."

"P-, Per- …you're wrong! Azayu's helmet fell in. Could you get it for us?"

Although she was different from how he pictured, she was still a suspicious witch, so how could he think of her in such a way.
Rubar frantically shook his head and gave his excuse.

"R-, Right. My helmet fell over there. By no means was he looking with rude intentions."

Azayu gave his support, still grasped by the collar.

"Hehehe, Boss Rubar is still such a child, isn't he."

And then the tipsy Head Chef sabotaged them.
The witch's eyes became sharp.

"What. If you want to look, then just say so. I'll show you as much as you want. Although you might not even want to look at the body of a woman past her prime like me."

Muttering something, the witch moved her hands to her cloth.
The cloth had just barely covered the region from her breast to the base of her legs, and it was only held up because the corner was folded inwards.
Just a little pull of her hand would be enough to undo it.

“W-, Wait! Don’t be hasty!”

“He’s right. Calm down. It’s okay. There’s still hope!”

Rubar frantically tried to persuade the witch, and then wondered what the heck Azayu was talking about.

“You think? You really think so? Really?”

The witch’s hands stopped, as she looked their way.

“I certainly do!”

“Of course! As long as you wish hard enough, you shall find the way!”

Rubar quietly stole a glance at Azayu. His always calm companion was apparently even more confused than he was at this moment.
Perhaps their heartfelt persuasion worked, because the witch let go of the cloth.
Rubar sighed with relief.

“Witch. Azayu’s helmet is by your feet. Sorry, but could we trouble you to pick it up?”

Dealing with a drunk was always tiring, but this witch was on another level.
Once they had Azayu’s helmet, Rubar was going to run away.
Hearing his request, the witch finally looked down.

“Aahh. This?”

After giving a carefree yawn, the witch squatted.
Before long, the witch appeared with a happy smile.

“Now then, a quiz. Was what you dropped this worn out torch-helmet? Or was it this key to the Tower of the Silent Sinner?”

Silence descended upon the room.
Both Rubar and Azayu, as well as the slightly tipsy Head Chef had their mouths hanging open, and their gazes nailed to the key in her right hand.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

The witch tilted her head in questioning.

“T-, That key…”

“Aahh, bad. Bad. You have to properly say which one, or I won’t give it.”

‘Goodness me’, shrugged the witch.

Rubar grasped her right hand.
Thoughts about the witch’s skin were long gone from his mind.

“It’s the key. The key. Azayu! Head Chef! It’s the key.”

“Yeah. It’s the key.”

“It’s the key, isn’t it, Boss.”

The two of them agreed with Rubar’s happy words.

“With this, the Prince can be saved. We can save Prince Hinoki!”

He unconsciously put strength into his grip.

“Ow-, hey, it hurts.”

The witch struck Rubar’s arm with Azayu’s helmet.

“Aah, my apologies.”

He softened his grip a little, but still kept a hold of her hand. He couldn’t risk her running away.
But why did the witch have a key to the castle? It was supposed to have been together with the Prince in the tower.

“Witch. Did you meet the Prince?”

“Prince?”

“Right. This key should have been with the Prince.

The witch slowly widened her eyes.

“The kid with this key was a prince?”

Her black eyes focused on Rubar’s face. And then she immediately sobered up.

“Right.”

Rubar nodded.

“You guys are going to save that boy?”

“Right.”

“You’re allies of that boy, and not his rotten stepmother?”

“Right.”

Rubar said so, firmly. The witch pressed her lips together, and letting go of the helmet, she gripped Rubar’s hand back in return.

“Thank goodness… So you had allies too.”

Perhaps because she was too relieved, the witch squatted powerlessly. With his hand still being held, Rubar tiptoed and fell forward onto the table.

“Witch, I’ll fall as well.”

“Ah-, sorry.”

The witch let go of his hand. The key was now in his.

“It feels like a weight’s been lifted from my shoulders.” she said.

Leaning his elbows on the table, Rubar looked down at the witch.
The tub by her feet was filled with clear liquid.

“So you were able to enter the tower? Was the Prince doing well?”

He always walked past the tower pretending to do something else, and had strained his ears to hear if the Prince was saying anything.
Sometimes he heard singing, but he never saw the Prince.

“Seemed like it. Incredibly so. What do you think that boy said when he first saw me? *‘You are too far past your prime to tempt me. Try again.*”

Azayu burst into laughter.

“How very like him”

“Yes, truly. It seems the Prince is doing well.”

The Head Chef’s eyes filled with tears as he agreed.
Rubar turned to look at the two.

“Now then. Let’s form a new plan. The secret messenger should have just about reached the Desert King by now.”

Things were about to become busy.
To free the Prince with the few forces they had, they would need a detailed plan.
It was still too early for optimism.
It would probably be no easy feat to release the Prince safely.
Perhaps somebody would lose their life at some point.
Perhaps it would be Rubar himself.
It would probably be even more difficult than when they dug the tunnel.
———————Still.
Rubar gazed at his right hand.
The key was in his hand now.

Chapter 9

It was when she flicked the bathroom switch in preparation for a bath that she first noticed that the lightbulb was broken.
Izumi had already taken off her clothes.
Too lazy to go search for a new one in the nude, she got in the bath after deciding that the street lights and neighbours' lights were plenty.

Suddenly, a small light in the corner of the room caught her eye.
A gentle light like the collected glow of a firefly.
It was attached to the silver helmet that had fallen from Azayu's head.

When she looked at it, the memories of last night came flooding back, clear in their embarrassment, and forcing Izumi to stifle an incoherent scream.

Izumi had a friend that never remembered what happened while they were drunk.
They could rampage and grumble, strip or turn into a kissing fiend, and the next day they wouldn't remember a thing. Apparently they didn't even get hangovers, and they'd be cheerful as ever the day after.

Right now Izumi deeply envied that friend of hers.

The pain and discomfort of her hangover was one thing, but worse than that were the fresh memories of last night.
Rubar's face filled with astoundment. Azayu's troubled face when she started something with him. The Head Chef's round face. What did they think when they saw her dead drunk and immodest? She was sure that they had thought her an incredibly slovenly woman.
'*But that's wrong! It's wrong!*', she wanted to scream.

Perhaps her only solace lay in the fact that she would never see any of these people again.
And although she wanted to see the child in the tower saved with her own two eyes, she also believed it was best not to get too involved. One-time meetings. That was best.
But still… to think that she actually had a exhibitionist streak.
Up until now she had decided that it couldn't be helped because she was in a bath, but not even in her wildest dreams had she imagined that the day would come that she would strip of her own accord.

'Bathroom or not, I'm never going to drink that much again.' swore Izumi as she tried to wash away her shame with a shower.

Finishing her head, and then body, before she got into the bath she spotted the helmet and noticed that it was still shining.
Izumi picked it up.
And then her vision overflowed with light.
As though fireflies in a small box were suddenly released into the wide night sky, the room was suddenly filled with light.
But only for an instant. In the next moment, the light suddenly weakened, and returned to its weak glow.
Izumi stared dumbfounded at the thing in her hands.

"What the heck is this…"

There was nobody to answer her murmur.
She found the silver helmet felt very heavy. There was a palm-sized flat stone embedded in the area that corresponded to the forehead. Its surface felt rough, and it twinkled.

"Light… GET?"

Although the light was unstable, it would probably serve plenty well in place of the lightbulb.
Leaving the helmet on the rim of the bathtub, Izumi soaked herself in the water.
While stretching her legs out in the bath, she decided to fold her arms above

her head and stretch there too.
The warm water gently loosened her body.

It was just as Izumi sighed that it happened.

The low voice that was probably a man's could be heard outside the window. Hearing this angry-sounding voice, Izumi drooped her head.
Wasn't the plot advancing a little quickly?
When the shouting stopped, this time it was the sound of metal. Clanks a little deeper than the sound of a ladle striking a saucepan.
Izumi had wanted to relax in peace for today at least. Although she decided to wait things out without opening the window, the shouting and clanking grew closer and closer.
She took the helmet into her hands and placed it on her head. It was too big for her, but she wore it just in case.
Slowly, she opened the window. Something shone white. Or so she registered, immediately before a shock ran through her head.
With a deep clank, light surged forth.
Although she threw her head back, the light was just too dazzling.
Around the time that the light began to settle, Izumi spotted two men outside her window.
One was dressed from head to toe in black, with only his eyes showing through the cloth wrapped around his face.
The other was wearing a light blue uniform. A long-sleeved top in light blue, and loose long pants. Inside the sash around his waist seemed to be something like a sheath. He too had cloth around his head, but unlike the other, his face was visible. His dark brown skin matched somebody else she knew.

The black-clothed man closer to the window raised his arm to Izumi.
When she saw the curved shortsword in his hand, Izumi let out a scream.
And her scream made the man flinch for just an instant.
Izumi took off her helmet and pelted it at the man.
Just before it hit him, the man in black cloth struck it to the ground with the pommel of his sword.
And when he did, light overflowed the area.
Through squinted eyes, Izumi saw.

The man in light blue had taken the black man's back. A thud rang out like the sound of a baseball bat on sandbag, after which the black man's chin shot up and he collapsed and convulsed.
The man in light blue then looked at Izumi.
An indescribable sense of tension was born between the two of them.

"G-, Good evening."

"…Yeah."

"Um, is that man in black clothing d-, dead?"

If he said "Yeah." with a nod, Izumi was determined to immediately shut the window.
But the man shook his head with a no.

"He's just unconscious. The guy is an important witness, so I'll tie him up later."

Saying that, he bent down to take the short sword that had fallen from the black man's hand.
As Izumi watched him to see what he planned to do, the man rolled him over with a kick, before reaching into the chest of the now face-up man. From there, he had withdrawn a scabbard. After sheathing the shortsword, he placed it into the cloth around his waist before tuning back to Izumi.
Sky blue eyes seemed to scrutinise Izumi with a stare.
He had a squarish chin, and a very powerful build. To the man, pinning down somebody like Izumi would be like taking candy from a baby.
Feeling pressured, Izumi placed her hand on the window.

"Ummm~ Well then, I'll be going."

Just as she tried to close it, the man grabbed it first.

"Wait."

Izumi let out a pathetic shriek in her mind.

"You've forgotten this."

With his hand still on the window, the man kicked up the helmet at his feet.
Sand and helmet flew through the air.
Grabbing the helmet with the other hand, the man presented it to Izumi.

“The moonstone was broken. It must have been expensive… Sorry.”

“Moonstone?”

Izumi tilted her head.
The man furrowed his brows.

“It’s the stone embedded here. When you send vibrations through it, it gives out light.”

Even though this woman is the owner, why doesn’t she know this? That was what the man’s face seemed to say.

“Ahhhh, so that’s why it shone.”

Izumi glanced at his face.
A daunting man who gave a keen impression. But perhaps he mightn’t be a bad guy.

“If you want it, you can have it. It’s just a guess, but I think it was meant for you.”

Water ended up as an earring, an earring ended up as a fire stone, a fire stone ended up as frostsnow grass, frostsnow grass ended up as the Keropii Sword, the Keropii Sword ended up as dragon blood, dragon blood ended up as a bean bag, a bean bag ended up as a key, and a key ended up as a shining helmet.
After all these connections, Izumi more or less understood. Even if she didn’t want to understand, she would be forced to.
The items she obtained would be useful for the next person.
She didn’t know what kind of karma was at play, but she probably had the role of being the bridge that connected the people beyond the window.

‘Please give me a break.’

The helmet span on the man's finger.

"I've heard a certain story from the King. In the desert, a goddess appears, he said."

"Huh?"

The people outside the window had called her all sorts of things. Was it goddess this time? That was quite a promotion from 'witch'.

"We were having drinks when he said it so I was sure I was being teased, but… something like that is actually possible?"

"Uhm, even if you ask me… Or rather, what king? Is it Setsugen?"

The man frowned.

"No, it's King Huuron, the descendant of Yohk'Zai's Founding King, the great Tenuhg. While he was in the desert, apparently a beautiful goddess saved his life."

The man tilted his head a little. Izumi did not fail to hear him mutter "Though you're a little different from what I heard…".

"Well *sorry*, for not being beautiful."

Perhaps he noticed Izumi's anger, because the man averted his eyes.

"No, that's not what I meant. The king mentioned that the goddess was like Harvest Goddess Kohyoku, but…"

Glancing at her as though to confirm something, the man lowered his gaze again.

"And Harvest Goddess Kohyoku is married to the cheating Land God Karan. She literally 'dominates*(JP: sits on)*' him so people depict her with full hips. Maybe that's why, but the statues of her that I see in Yohk'Zai are all voluptuous and… No, I mean, I'm not saying that I'm biased against your kind of body development or anything. And Kohyoku is the goddess

of being blessed with many children as well, you see. And with how slender you are… Well, maybe it's nothing more than my personal opinion, but…"

The man's voice grew quieter and quieter as he continued to dig his own hole.

"If you 'explain yourself' any further, I'm going to pour water over your head."

"…Sorry."

The man bowed in apology.

"But well, I know who your king is now. He's the person with the blue-stone earring, right?"

Looking carefully, she found that this man was wearing similar clothes to the earring man. His dark brown skin was a match as well, and to begin with, she only knew of one person lost in a desert.
It was the person that the Prime Minister Teo Keh had been frantically looking for. She knew that he was probably important to Yohk'Zai, but he was actually the king?

"That's right. So you truly are the goddess that saved his life then."

Izumi gave a vague smile. It was true that she had saved him, but she wasn't a goddess. Only, explaining would just be a bother.

"Is the King well?"

"Yeah," the man nodded, before casting his eyes down.

'Oh?'

"Did something happen to the King?"

"The King received an invitation from Queen Akka, and left for Ii'Jibro two days ago."

Izumi caught her breath. Ii'Jibro was the country that Prince Hinoki belonged to.
The man raised his head. His eyes were sharp, and seemed to be restraining his furious indignation.

"Last night, a secret messenger arrived. The invitation was a trap. The road that the Queen gave had a nest of terrifying insects. In exchange for the map with the nest location, the messenger appealed for us to save his nation's prince."

Izumi gripped the window frame.

"Hey! Has King Huuron received the map from the messenger? He left two days ago, right? It can't be, it can't be but, you're not on the way to notifying him, are you?"

If he was, then it definitely wasn't the time for a chat.

"Indeed I was. I was on the way to notifying the King."

"Not *'was'*! You need to hurry and go!"

Izumi wanted to snatch the helmet out of his hands and smack him across the head with it.

"No need to worry. There are others on the way."

"Heh?"

"Of course we wouldn't have dispatched just the one person. Five people skilled with riding rubas are each on their own way with a copy of the Ii'Jibro map."

The man produced from his pocket a folded piece of paper.
When Izumi reflexively held out her hand, he plopped it onto her palm.
It felt thicker and coarser than the map in the tower. When she spread it open, she found various symbols that she didn't understand. Between the symbols was a line like a wriggling snake. Was this line the safe route through the desert?

“Teo Keh-dono was worried that Queen Akka noticed the messenger and dispatched assassins, and it seems like he was right on the mark.”

The man kicked at the black-clothed one on the floor.

“Because of these guys’ poison arrow, my ruba is no use now. I’ll be waiting here with him until another squad arrives.”

“Eh? ‘These guys’?”

Izumi raised her eyes from the map.
She turned her gaze instead to the people behind the man.
There was no wind. The blue light of the moon illuminated the numerous sand mounds through the silent skies. And this wondrous scene seemed to be dotted with black spots here and there, like blotches of black ink.
The closest black dot seemed to be something like a long-necked horse, or maybe a camel with no humps.
And behind it, the black dots here and there were men wearing the same black garb as the one right below her.
With a trembling finger, Izumi pointed behind the man.

“Um, are the people laying there behind you, dead?”

“Yeah.”

Turning around, the man nodded.
The blue cloth hanging from his head swayed in the air.

“Well then, I’ll be going! The night seems cold, but do your best okay?”

Izumi closed the window with all her might.

Chapter 10

His foothold was unstable.
The sand continued to billow.
By his side, the ruba that had drawn the cart had collapsed from the weight.
Sohv desperately spurred on the ruba he rode as he reached out for the bit of other. His fingers grazed them. But that was as far as they went.
Following an eerie sound, the ground beneath their feet began to collapse.
Together with the luggage cart, Sohv was being swallowed into the sand.
The sand free-fell.
Before he knew it, Sohv had been tossed from his ruba.
It felt like countless hands gripped his legs, and were dragging him to the depths of hell. Did something await him down there? Just imagining it sent a tremble down his spine.
The cloud of sand blocked his vision. To protect himself from swallowing it, Sohv frantically moved his arms to pull the cloth around his neck up as far as his nose.

After who knew how many prayers to the God of the Earth, Karan, the sand finally stopped its movements.
Although he was buried to the chest in sand, he just barely succeeded in freeing his right arm. But just that much wouldn't free him from the earth. Struggling to get out had simply sent him further down.
Now that the sand cloud had settled, the cart was immediately visible. It had been half swallowed in the tumult earlier, but the luggage portion covered by the canopy was unharmed. As for the front of the cart, the ruba attached there was giving its all to crawl out of the sand. As for his other ruba, it was pacing about restlessly beside him.

A relieved sigh left his mouth.

Looking around to survey the situation, he found a wall of sand all around him. But when he looked upwards, he found a blue sky. Sohv was at the bottom of a mortar made from the earth.
Just how would he climb out from here? Or would it be better to wait until somebody noticed and rescued him?
While he was running these ideas through his head, the cart ruba placed a forefoot atop the sand.
Sohv responded by immediately gripping a wheel just as the ruba crawled out of the sand. The ruba pulled on the cart, and Sohv's body began to leave the earth as well. He somehow managed to get out as far as his knees. But that was when the cart stopped moving.

What's going on?

Looking up, he found that the ruba was on its knees, blood running from its neck.
A weak cry reached his ears.
Just what on earth had happened?
Sohv simply watched in a daze as the ruba's life extinguished.

It was only the other day that a new king was crowned in Yohk'Zai.
With the backing of Prime Minister Teo Keh, the nation which had been on the brink of civil war was seized in the blink of an eye by the new king.
Even despite the huge numbers of those dissatisfied by his sudden appearance, and those who questioned his origins.
No sooner had King Huuron ascended to the throne did he begin to reform the military.
He gave focus to those with real ability. Those who refused to obey were forcefully replaced. In this manner, he spread his influence into every corner of the military, and with this army as his support, he placed a lid on the dissent towards him.
So striking was his rise to power that there were even jokes about him being the second coming of Founding King Tenuhg.
In about the span of the year, he tidied away problems of the other successor candidates. And at the end of that year, just as Yohk'Zai had

gained a strong king again, and finally seemed to see a future again, a messenger from the neighbouring Ii'Jibro arrived.

That nation Ii'Jibro had once had strong trade and exchange with Yohk'Zai, but as Yohk'Zai met its decline, so had their exchanges.
The messenger brought with him a letter from the Queen.
She congratulated the new king on his ascendancy, and stated her desires to begin trading again. In order to work out the details, she wished to meet him in person. Although it would be impolite to ask him to come, as a woman a long journey would be rough on her body, and so she wished strongly that he would come to Ii'Jibro. So said the letter.
Her nation produced so many moon stones that its luminance rivalled the night sky, and was a large country that ruled the half of the Central Plains. There was no reason to put off diplomacy with them.
However, as a newly reborn country, it would not do for Yohk'Zai's king to be absent. Thus, Prime Minister Teo Keh insisted that he would be going himself. He was stopped by King Huuron however, and in the end Huuron was the one who headed to Ii'Jibro.

At this moment, his troop was in the middle of their journey.
Rare for the time of year, they met no sandstorms and made great time. It was likely that they would arrive at the borders a full day earlier. Given that it would Sohv's first time in another nation, he was bracing himself for anything.

When they had first passed Ii'Jibro's borders, they found that it was desert just like Yohk'Zai. As they continued in, just as they were musing about the rocky areas they were beginning to see, these areas became larger and larger, and by midday the gargantuan boulders were large enough that they had to crane their necks to look.
On the other hand, it was still more desert beneath their feet, and Sohv wondered in mystery as to why these boulders didn't sink over time.

It was just as they were passing by a few of these megaliths that something abnormal occurred.
Even though there was no wind, the sand began to move.
The sound of the breeze passing through the boulders sounded like the cries of the damned, somebody said.

Unease spread through the soldiers, and order was beginning to collapse.
One of the carts at the end of the line was moving particularly slowly, and by the time Sohv realised, he had begun to run.
And then, Sohv was swallowed by the sand…

Blood flowed endlessly from the ruba's neck, and dyed the sand red.
Even forgetting to pull out his legs from the sand, Sohv who had been focused on the ruba suddenly noticed writhing in the sand nearby, and drew his sword in preparation.
An unpleasant grating sound rang out, followed by a dent in the sand.
Sohv gulped.
From the hole appeared a huge insect. From its head forked two large horns, and on their inner side projected a number of sharp spikes.
Getting caught between them equated to death.
With his sword still brandished, Sohv tried to remove his feet from the sand, just before the insect turned its focus from the cart to him.
He felt a cold sweat run down his back.
Suddenly.

-garari-

A pleasant noise sounded from behind him, and warm steam flowed through the air.
With his sword still pointed at the insect, Sohv turned his head back, and his eyes widened.
Was this a waking dream caused by his fear?
Or was this some phantom of a mirage?
At either rate, it was impossible for it to be reality. Because the scene in front of him was even more unbelievable than the enormous insect; it was the sudden appearance of some naked woman.

"What the heck is *that*…?"

And finally the illusion was complete with auditory hallucinations.

"Hell if I know."

Although he knew that it was all a phantasm, he found himself answering due to how real the woman's voice sounded.

"It's kinda… insect-y, hey?"

"Yeah, but the size is ridiculous."

"Are you being attacked?"

"It seems like I'm being attacked."

"Wouldn't it be better if you ran?"

"I can't. I'm protecting the cart. It's the presents that we painstakingly gathered for Ii'Jibro. We cannot lose it."

"Think you can win?"

"Hell if I know!" he replied roughly to the somewhat carefree woman's question.

Right now wasn't the time to be answering the idiotic questions of a hallucination.
The insect moved its six multi-jointed legs to approach.
The woman behind him muttered "…whoa, that's grotesque".
Little by little, little by little, the insect continued to bridge the gap, before stopping. Or so he thought, when it suddenly closed the remaining distance in one leap and attacked him.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"GYAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Sohv screamed, and the illusion's overlapped his.
As he screamed, he swung his sword from low to high. However. It was a moment too early.
The sword only severed a single one of its legs, and it landed right before him.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” once more screamed the phantasm from the rear.

Something flew past his ear.
It was a ball made from a vividly coloured cloth. The cloth ball had struck the insect dead-on, and from inside some kind of powder had flown out.
And although he didn’t know why, when the powder scattered, the insect let out an anguished cry from its whole body, as though it was about to die.

“N-, Now! Come on, now! Finish it!”

Coming back to his senses, Sohv thrust his sword into its back.
After passing through a tough shell, he could feel soft meat from the tip of his sword.
The insect started to retreat. Sohv tried to withdraw his sword, but he was too slow, and the grip parted from his hands.

“Ahhhh… What the heck are you doing!” scolded the illusion.

Feeling an odd sort of unfairness about this situation, he took a step forward to try and retrieve his sword.
It was at that moment when from the rim of the massive hole he was in, blue cloth billowed in the air, as somebody jumped right in.
Landing inside, and sliding down the sand to the very base, the newcomer ran as he drew his sword, and cut down the insect from behind.

“King!”

Together with the scream, soldier after soldier descended into the hole.
When about ten of them had entered, the commander at the rim stopped the rest of the soldiers.
As for the ones inside, they had already stabbed towards the near-dead insect, and it was finally finished off.
The blue man who had been first to jump in turned his gaze towards Sohv.
Sohv audibly gulped.
Before the man’s sharp gaze, Sohv couldn’t manage to remain calm.
The man removed the navy overcoat that adorned his back, and approached.
But he passed by Sohv, and continued further behind.

“It’s been a while. Very nice get-up as usual, but unfortunately it’s bad for soldiers fresh from a fight.”

“It’s been a while. …It’s not like I’m naked because I want to be, though.”

When Sohv turned around, he found that the man in blue――――King Huuron, had draped his overcoat around the illusion… or rather, the woman that he had mistaken for an illusion.

“Thanks.”

The woman gave a light bow.

“No, it’s I that should be thanking you. Seems that you’ve helped me again.”

“King, um, that woman… I mean, who might this personage be?”

The king smirked at Sohv’s question, before replying,

“A goddess.”

The moment those words left his mouth, the smile of the woman introduced as a goddess looked endlessly troubled.

“I know Teo Keh called you a mystic or something, but don’t you think you’re worthy of ‘goddess’?”

“Geez, just do as you like.”

“Hahaha,” laughed the Goddess in tired resignation, but suddenly her stiff smile turned to a look of surprise.

“Behind you!”

After the Goddess screamed, her arms shot out from beneath the king’s overcoat, and she grabbed two vivid cloths like the one she threw before. Placing the cloth in her mouth, she forcefully tore it apart with her canines before throwing it at Sohv.

Sohv inclined his neck to avoid it, and turned around with his sword ready. As he thought, there was another insect there.
It was just about to tear through the cart canopy with its two long horns when the cloth ball struck it in its side. At which point some black powder scattered from inside.

-GICHIIIIII!-

The insect swung its whole body.

Following the first ball, the Goddess threw yet another.
Soldiers swung their swords towards the insect that was starting to burrow. As its legs flew, and two swords pierced its belly, the insect stopped burrowing.
Twitching with its remaining legs, a green liquid flowed from the insect, and its movements stopped.

“Tsk, just how many fucking are there.”

The King clicked his tongue in irritation.

“Ummm~ There’s a little something I’d like to ask, but has the map from the Ii’Jibro messenger arrived yet?”

“What?”

Turning back to the Goddess, the King’s eyebrows raised.
His attitude was a little rude to be taking towards somebody introduced as a goddess.

“Queen Akka from Ii’Jibro deliberately invited you guys here because of the dangerous insects. And so, a messenger from Ii’Jibro came, and in exchange for the rescue of their prince stuck in a tower, they handed over a map with safe passage to Teo Keh, apparently.”

The king let out a short chuckle.

“Are you omniscient, Goddess?”

“No, no, not at all. You see, I met one of the guys delivering the map the other day. His ruba got done in and so he couldn’t do his job, but he did say there were four others like him.”

“It doesn’t look like they arrived though, huh…” she muttered.

“The wind was calm, you see. That’s why we’re ahead of schedule.”

The Goddess placed her hand against her forehead, and hung her head. Seeming to be thinking about something, she didn’t even notice the overcoat slipping gently from her right shoulder. Her right hand seemed to be clutching her chest, and so nothing else would be exposed, but Sohv had gotten a cold sweat.
After a while, she finally lifted her head, and looked straight at the King.

“Do you have a map?”

“Well yeah, I do.”

The King nodded as though it was natural.

“Well, I’ve got *this* map here, you see…”

The Goddess leaned over, and stretched her hand into some invisible place beyond the frame.
From some mysterious clear cloth, she produced a small, folded paper, and flapped it teasingly.

“It doesn’t look… like you’ll give it for free, huh.”

“You said it’d be bad luck for you, right?”

The Goddess smiled at the King’s words.

“It’s easy. If by the time you’re done, Prince Hinoki is still trapped inside the tower, I want you to help him.”

“Just what about that is easy…?” muttered the King in astoundment.

Sohv was of the exact same opinion.
A large sigh escaped the King.

“But I suppose you can’t escape a crisis without some sacrifice. I’ll accept those conditions of yours. Since she thinks that I’ve been eaten by these insects, I doubt Queen Akka shall be expecting me.”

The Goddess beamed in response.

“Thanks for business as usual.”

She was a Goddess that felt far from divine.

After the King accepted the map from her, he opened it up before frowning.

“The name of this insect is the *arrijighock*. Rejoice, you lot. Apparently each nest only has three to four of them.”

Sohv and the other soldiers flusteredly formed a ring around him.
There would be one or two left. Perhaps it was lurking nearby.

“If we don’t finish the insect off, doesn’t look like we can grab the cargo, does it.”

Sohv glared at the sand to catch even the smallest movements.
The soldiers down here with him, as well as the soldiers up top at the rim, all held their breaths and darted their gazes about.
Because of the blowing wind, sand fell from the sides of the wall.

The one who broke the silence was the Goddess.

“Heyy, what’s inside that cart?”

“Wine and gunpowder.”

The King’s response sounded somehow disappointed.
As though asking, ‘So what about the cargo?’.

“That bug, the *arrijighock* I mean, do you know what kind of stuff it likes?”

The King frowned.
And Sohv took a sharp breath as he realised.

“The *arrijighock* is aiming for the cargo?”

Even though a bleeding ruba was there, the *arrijighock* had gone for the canopy.
Sohv rushed over the the cart and peer under it.

-drip drip-

It was leaking something.

“King! It’s the wine! It looks like the *arrijighock* was attracted by the wine!”

The soldiers by the cart recoiled in shock.
And where they were looking, the sand suddenly formed a depression.

“It’s here!”

Sohv aimed into the ground at where he suspected it was hiding.
He felt a cut from the end of his sword. But it was too shallow.

“My sincere apologies. It escaped.”

Dropping his sword arm, Sohv rejoined the ring, and felt the King’s hand on his shoulder.
The cloth around his hand and fingers were dirty with sand. And Sohv was proud at the reason why.

“Using wine to lure it, huh… But it’d be a huge shame to let our cargo take any more damage, huh.”

The wine was being carried in barrels. From the amount that had leaked, the damage didn’t seem too bad.
But in the time that they spent to move them, the *arrijighock* might appear from beneath the cart again.

“Then I’ll give you some. Wine, that is.”

Sohv heard a small mutter.
When he looked at Goddess from which it originated, with two smooth cylinders in her hand, she stretched out her arms from the rectangle.

“These are my last two, but take them.”

What a tragic expression she wore.

Even though it’s just wine…

Sohv himself was astounded by her attitude, but perhaps wine was simply that important to the gods.
The King began leaving the encirclement.

“What do you want in return?”

“Just the promise from before is plenty.”

After receiving the cylinders from the Goddess, he turned around and shouted,

“Lower the planks!”

Following that, one by one, he looked at the faces of the soldiers down here with him.

“Build a ring with the planks. We’ll pour wine down the middle. Listen up, aim for the moment it leaves the sand.”

The soldiers above began lowering planks with rope.
The King turned once more to the Goddess.

“We’re going to exterminate the insect now. It might be better if you left first, Goddess.”

Placing his hand on the rectangular frame that housed the Goddess, the King pulled his arm from right to left.

Sohv's eyes widened in shock.
Even though just a moment ago, the Goddess had been there in the overcoat, she had now disappeared.
It wasn't simply the Goddess either. Even the frame that he had grabbed was now nowhere to be seen.
It was as though the Goddess had never been there to start with…

Chapter 11

Mould.

At this rate it would definitely mould.

Looking at the blue mantle hanging from the line, Izumi's features curved into a frown.

The mantle given to her by the man lost in the desert――――in other words, by King Huuron――――was thicker than expected.
But the desert was hot in the daytime, and freezing in the night. Perhaps something like this was to be expected.

At any rate, the mantle was certainly thick. Had that been the only thing, then Izumi wouldn't have worried.
Embroidery decorated it in the same colour as its cloth, and its craftsmanship was clearly finer than anything she had ever seen.
It spoke much that the first thing she thought was 'looks expensive'.

Up until now she had received two bottles of the finest liquor, three balls of hahanero bags, and then even a map, so surely it was no big deal to receive a mantle that was just a little fancy…?
Izumi didn't think so at all.
The mantle was simply that splendid.
Perhaps she would meet a poor person next.
Selling it would probably net a fortune. But it was still technically the mantle of Yohk'Zai's king. Perhaps selling it would garner unwanted attention.
And thus she concluded that it was still best to simply return it.

However, this was not the same as wanting to meet him herself. The reason she didn't mind people seeing her naked is because she had been sure that she would never meet them again. Now that she knew that wasn't an absolute, she started to care a little more about her appearance.

Izumi glanced at the vinyl bag in the corner. Her newly purchased bathrobe lay inside.
This time she would be prepared no matter when her window might connect to a strange world.
Perhaps she would be able to relax more this time.

Which left the current problem. While safely blow-drying the mantle from a distance, she wracked her brains wondering how she could return this to King Huuron.

The hot air continued to leave the dryer.

Suddenly, the cry of "Fire!" overlapped the sound of the machine.
Did the shout come from this world, or did it come from the mysterious world beyond her windowsill? The quickest way to determine it was simply to open her window.
Turning off the drier, she ducked past the mantle on the line and then opened the window.
And it was connected to the inside of some house she didn't know.

Ochre dirt walls. A kitchen seemingly carved from stone. Warm furniture made of wood. And finally, two people in white-coloured clothing.
The two of them hadn't noticed Izumi's presence yet, and were looking outside through the opened wooden window.
And outside the window, beyond a gap of about a metre, was the window of a house placed diagonally from theirs.

Izumi closely examined the two of them. Their bare arms were of brownish hue, and it brought to mind a desert people. But their clothing was completely different. White clothing that resembled an ancient kantoui or tunic, tied with a white belt that lustred like silk. Both tunics went beyond the buttocks, and whilst one was like a long skirt that reached the ankles, the other had a shorter skirt that reached just below the knees.

From the silhouettes, Izumi could tell that the knee-length tunic was worn by a man, whilst the ankle-length by a woman.

“W-, What should we do, Kyousui-san? There might still be children left behind! Aahh, why isn’t anybody going to save them? Should I go bring water?”

“It’s pointless. With motor skills like yours, there’ll just be one extra person to save. The soldiers will be here soon.”

“Well that might be true, but still…”

The man glanced at face of the woman next to him. From what Izumi could see, he had friendly looking eyes that slanted outwards, and particularly striking were his shining red earrings.
When Kyousui, the woman, looked back towards him, she noticed Izumi. Her eyes widened so far that they were in danger of falling out of her head.

“Eh? EHH? UMM… EHH!?”

She pointed at Izumi as she visibly struggled for words. Because of this, the man noticed Izumi as well.

“Hello. Umm, you might not believe me but, I’m nobody suspicious. By the by, might you be having trouble of some sort?”

First was greeting them.

“Oh, well thank you for introducing yourself,” said the man as he bowed. It was a standard response, but it seemed to Izumi that he was simply numb from shock.

After raising his head, the man ran over to Izumi’s side.

“The truth is, we’re terribly troubled, Lady Magician!”

Izumi didn’t comment. Her experience suggested that correcting him was pointless.

“The house beyond this alleyway is on fire, but there might still be small children in there! Please lend us your aid!”

Izumi was troubled. The man’s response was so intense that he might prostrate himself at any moment.

“Ummmm.”

She turned back to check her bathroom.
The only thing that looked to be of use was the swaying mantle before her eyes.
Izumi snatched it. The clothes peg fell to the ground.
She turned the knob of her shower and held the mantle beneath the water.

“Perhaps you could cover yourself with this and save them yourself. Don’t try the impossible though.”

Izumi forced the words, “Because you look kinda slow.” back down her throat.

“Oohh, how reliable. If this is Lady Magician’s cloth then there will surely be no problem.”

It’s just a normal, fancy cloth though…

Izumi couldn’t help but feel incredibly nervous.

“Dear, wait a moment!”

Kyousui tried to stop the man, but he had already donned the mantle and was on the verge of jumping through the window. He tried to make a gallant jump through the window, but his raised leg got caught on the mantle, and he fell through the window instead.
Izumi could hear the dull noise from the impact.

“I told you that it was impossible for you!” shouted Kyousui as she leaned through the window.

It was at that moment that Izumi spotted bright red hair fluttering beyond her.

“I’ll be borrowing this cloth!”

A voice reached her ears. It was calm, and low, but unmistakably a woman’s.

Who exactly, Izumi couldn’t see, but apparently somebody had torn the mantle off the man.
As the man floundered outside however, Izumi occasionally spotted the somebody’s bright red head beyond the windowsill.

Now fully wrapped in the cloth, a woman stood up outside.
The fiery red hair that reached her hips was tied into a high ponytail.
Her white skin was tanned slightly olive, while her sharp brows, straight nose, and clear blue eyes painted the image of a strong-willed woman. Said eyes were currently turned towards Izumi.
The moment she saw her, the woman looked astonished for a moment, but she immediately regained her composure.
Clad in Huuron’s mantle, she dashed off without hesitation.
It didn’t take long for her to disappear down the alley.

“Owowow…” muttered the man, as he stood up, rubbing his hips.

From far outside, Izumi could hear a crowd falter between horrified screams, and cheers of joy.
Black smoke rose from the neighbouring house as the flame audibly crackled.

“Dear, hurry inside!” screamed Kyousui.

Her shout had brought Izumi back to her senses.
She rushed out of her bathroom and grabbed every bucket and pail she could find, and when she ran out, she went for the vases as well.
When she returned to the bathroom, Kyousui was just on the verge of dragging the man back herself.

“We’re going to do a bucket relay,” Izumi declared to her.

“Eh?”

Kyousui turned around.
Without delay, Izumi forced a bucket of water into her hands.

“Come on! Hurry up! Hand it to the man outside!”

After glancing at the bucket, and then at Izumi, Kyousui gave a strong nod before making for the window.

“Dear! It’s water! Come on, hurry!” she shouted.

The man had been standing there dazedly, but Kyousui’s voice sent his head snapping back towards her.
Receiving the bucket, he splashed the water through a burning window. By the time he had finished, Kyousui was ready with the second bucket. One after another, Izumi handed the filled containers to Kyousui, and one after another, Kyousui handed them to the man. When the man had emptied each one, he would exchange it for the one in Kyousui’s arms, before turning back to toss the water through the window. For a stopgap measure, it was rather well-done.

Just as sweat was beginning to form on their brows, a gust of wind came from beyond that window.
Earlier, the red-head had charged in with the mantle on her person. That same woman was now jumping out of the window, carrying something wrapped in that mantle.

Gently placing the bundle onto the ground, she unfurled the blue cloth, and from inside appeared a boy of four or five. His teary, bloodshot eyes looked around uneasily. Although he tried to clench his lips tight, it was heart-rending that sobs still escaped them. However, he wasn’t injured, and there wasn’t a single burn mark on him.

“Mister! I’ll leave this boy to you. And Miss, I’m sorry about this, but could you hide me? The soldiers are starting to gather, and I have a reason that I

don’t want to be seen.”

Right after she finished speaking, the woman handed the child to the man, and then entered the house through the window. Naturally she didn’t catch her foot on anything.
Kyousui showed her agreement by reaching for the window shutters.

“Dear, I’m leaving this to you.”

“Hm? UMM, EHH!? AH-, WAIT, KYOUSUI-SAAAN!”

The man’s voice disappeared as the window closed.
Kyousui wrung a wet cloth to give to the sooty woman.
She accepted it with thanks, and began wiping her cheeks and arms down.
Looking closely, it was now obvious that the ends of her hair and part of her sash were burnt black, and the back of her right hand had turned red.

“Come here,” beckoned Izumi. “We’ll cool your hand with running water.”

Although the woman tilted her head in confusion, she came over nonetheless.

Turning on a cold shower, Izumi took the woman’s hand to hold beneath it.

“Sorry for the trouble,” said the woman, as she left her arm to Izumi.

It was at this point that the woman noticed the mantle in her other hand and caught her breath.

“Looking carefully, isn’t the embroidery on this cloak amazing!? It’s my first time seeing such a beautiful and detailed design.”

After sighing in admiration, the woman spoke apologetically to Kyousui.

“I’m sorry, Miss. I don’t think I can reimburse you with something like this, but I’ll try my best to repay you.”

“No, that doesn’t belong to us. It’s actually Lady Magician’s.”

“Magician?”

Now subjected to two stares, Izumi shook her head.

“No, well, that isn’t exactly mine but… Well, it did save the life of a child, so I guess its original owner wouldn’t complain.”

“Truly? How magnanimous,” she replied, before staring at the mantle.

Its edges were charred black, and the rest of it was soiled with sooty water. Its intricate patterns now frayed, and it looked beyond repair.

On the other hand, the sash wrapped around her waist lustred splendidly, its gradated dye-job reminiscent of the morning sky.

In Izumi’s eyes, it too, was quite the work of art.

No, actually, it’s not the sash that’s the real pity here…

“It looks like the ends of your hair are singed.”

The waist-length hair was as red as red could be, and it was obvious to anyone’s eyes that it had been carefully tended to.
Both the embroidered mantle and the sash had been a shame, but as a fellow woman, it was the woman’s hair that pained Izumi’s heart the most.

“It’ll grow back in no time,” smiled the woman. Though the smile had been a casual one, it was charming like the blooming of a gorgeous flower.

“Now then, please help yourselves,” announced Kyousui with food and drink. “I’m not sure if it will suit your tastes, but please go ahead.”

“Aye, thank you. To tell the truth, I haven’t eaten since this morning,” said the woman. She promptly put down the mantle, and brought drink to her mouth. Without delay, her hand continued on towards the pita-like flatbread with the green paste inside.

“Lady Magician, please help yourself as well. It’s naan with *zora bean*.”

“Thanks.”

Izumi took some naan without reserve.
The surrounding bread was roast crisp, whilst the green paste inside had a texture not unlike roughly-ground red-bean paste. Although it could do with just a little more salt, it had a gentle and light taste to it.

“How delicious,” muttered the redhead.

Izumi agreed. But for some reason the woman had sighed sadly.
When she raised her head, she found Kyousui frowning towards the woman.

“Umm, could it be that you are Princess Hitow?”

“EH-!?”

Izumi’s gaze returned to the redhead.
The redhead nodded with a complicated expression.

“Quite so. I am Hitow.”

“A PRINCESS!?”

“Shh! You’re being loud.”

When Izumi accidentally raised her voice, Hitow placed a finger against Izumi’s lips.

Ohh! So they have the same gesture in this world!

It was a little moving.

“Why? Ohhh, is that because you don’t want to be found by your soldiers?”

She now knew why Hitow didn’t want her screaming ‘PRINCESS!’. But as for why she didn’t want to be found, Izumi still had no idea.

“I still don’t get why, though.”

Izumi's frank question caused the redhead————Princess Hitow————to hang her head silently.
Her messy hair concealed her face.
Izumi was sent into a panic.

"Um, I'm really sorry. I asked something personal, but I didn't mean to pry if you didn't want to answer."

Hitow raised her head and shook it.

"No, it's natural to have questions. Unworthy though I may be, I am still royalty, and it was shameful to make a citizen feel uneasy. My apologies."

Her bow was so perfect that people might think her OCD, whilst Izumi the recipient was watching on with a stiff expression. To begin with, Izumi wasn't her citizen, so there was no reason to apologise.
While Izumi was wondering to herself how to explain, Hitow let out a sigh.

"I had a disagreement with some of my officials, you see. I desired some time alone, so I left the palace to cool my head."

Seeing the look of grief appear on Hitow's graceful features, Izumi opened her mouth to say something, but closed it soon after.
She realised that Princess Hitow's skin was flawless, save for the faint bags under her eyes.
The girl looked to be about twenty. It was an age that already came with its own troubles, but coupled with the baggage of royalty and they were sure to be on another scale. How could Izumi possibly give advice to a person like that.
The mood had turned dark like the sky before rainfall.
It was Kyousui who first timidly broke the silence.

"It might be presumptuous of me to ask, but could it be that Your Highness is troubled by the marriage proposal from King Cornou of Tohji?"

Hitou was wide-eyed.
Her cheeks began to lightly blush.

“How, did you…”

“As you can see, I am an immigrant, and when I first arrived in this nation, I was shocked by how close the royalty was to their citizens. Everyone was so warm and frank that you couldn’t feel the walls of social status… Which is why everyone is worried. Even though Your Highness had been so shy and joyful just hearing King Cornou’s name, recently Your Highness’s smiles have all seemed sad.”

The princess buried her face into her knees.

“Everybody noticed all of that? How immature I must be.”

With an overreaction like that, it was possible that absolutely anybody could tell. Izumi stared at Princess Hitow.

“Our meeting was surely some kind of fate, so we’ll hear you out if you want. I think that we can be franker than your advisers.”

“I wouldn’t understand political issues, but from what I humbly see, Your Highness’s situation is different, yes? So rather than white-haired gentlemen, perhaps the two of us would be more suitable,” added Kyousui.

Princess Hitow raised her head.
To say nothing of her cheeks, to say nothing of her ears, Hitow’s entire face flushed bright red like a tomato.

“You’ll listen? It’s pathetic though, so you might be disillusioned.”

“Of course we’ll listen.”

“Yes.”

The two of them nodded reassuringly.
After taking a large breath, Princess Hitow let out a large sigh and slumped her shoulders.

“I can’t eat (it),” she muttered.

“Hah?”

“Eh?”

Their two voices overlapped.
Izumi’s heart pounded for a moment as she wondered if it was a sexual euphemism, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

“Can’t eat, what?” asked Kyousui.

“I can’t eat Tohjian food.”

Thought so.

Izumi was just a little bit disappointed.

“Almost everything in Tohjian cuisine includes *coconasso*. And I can’t stand that distinct, saccharine flavour it has. Curry, naan, everything made with *coconasso*…. Each time I visit Tohji I force the stuff down with drink, but two days is my limit. Living in Tohji? Without eating *coconasso*? It’s so ridiculous that King Cornou would be astounded. So I suggested that we postpone the marriage. At the moment I’m actually in the middle of some special training designed to force myself to get used to it. But it might be impossible for me…”

“That’s, ummm… terrible, maybe…”

It was a little childish to be picky about ones food, but everybody had things they were bad at. If something you hated was in everything you ate, perhaps it really would be tough.
Earlier, Izumi’s mouth had been hanging in disbelief, but after imagining a world where everything included shiitake mushrooms, she suddenly revised her opinion.

“Couldn’t Your Highness ask them to exclude *coconasso* from your food?” asked Kyousui, before adding, “It might take the cooks a little longer though.”

The Princess shook her head.

“*Coconasso* is special to King Cornou.”

“Special?”

Izumi tilted her head in wonder.

“Indeed. Roughly ten years ago, Tohji was struck by famine. Until then, *coconasso* had only been eaten in one region of the nation, but given the famine, King Cornou himself spread its use and increased its production. It matures quickly, is strong against disease, and provides splendid nourishment. I heard from citizens of Tohji that many infants were saved thanks to its boons. With its place in the hearts of King Cornou and his citizens, how could I say that I couldn’t eat it. King Cornou will surely come to hate me. He will deride me for being such a selfish princess.”

Hmmmmm.

Izumi crossed her arms in thought.
If they hadn’t eaten it until ten years ago, then it was quite possible to create foods without it. If it was just food that she wasn’t used to, it would probably be fine to refuse it. But now that it was the foodstuffs that saved a nation, refusing it could be taken as extravagance as well. Just how would King Cornou himself take it?

“What kind of person is King Cornou?”

The moment that Izumi asked this, Princess Hitow went from slumping and sighing, to having sparkles in her eyes.

“A wonderful gentleman! He’s thoughtful, and wiser than anyone, and even though his features look gentle he never flinches from anyone or anything. And he’s strict with himself, and strives for perfection in everything. I’ve always admired him.”

“I-, I see.”

As Hitow stressed every word with clenched fists, Izumi could only nod stiffly.

Can such a superman really exist?

“Huhuhu.”

Looking up, the happy laughter had come from Kyousui.

Eh? Was that something to laugh at just now?

Izumi looked at Kyousui as a cold sweat formed at her brow.

“I’m sorry. Your Highness was simply adorable, so…”

Hiding her mouth behind a hand, Kyousui smiled once again, sending the Princess into bewilderment, and then a scowl.
After her smile disappeared, Kyousui gave Hitow a warm gaze that an older sister might give to her younger sister.

“It seems that Your Highness has fallen in love with King Cornou.”

The Princess flushed again.

“Ah… no, rather than falling in love, it’s more… like respect…”

No, it’s definitely falling in love, thought Izumi.

“Sometimes, falling for somebody makes a woman frail. They don’t want to be hated, and they don’t want to lose them, and they spend all day thinking about nothing but them. It once happened to me as well. Back then, there was nothing scarier to me than the thought of losing him… although, I suppose not much about that has changed…”

Kyousui smiled again, but this time it wasn’t a happy smile. Instead it was a lonely, and somehow reminiscing smile.

“Because of some circumstances between us, we had no choice but to leave our country. With my older brother’s cooperation, we managed to leave, but until we passed the borders, not one day did we feel alive. Even when we first arrived in this nation, we were terrified of losing each other, and spent

each day in fear. Up until then, I was often told in my homeland that I was bold like my brother, you know? But then I fell for him, and I changed."

To Izumi, Kyousui had seemed to be living a happy life with her muddleheaded but kind husband. Apparently Kyousui had lived a tough life of her own though. While Kyousui's stormy life saddened Izumi, at the same time it also made her envious. After all, Kyousui's fears were testament to the strength of her feelings for the man.

"But, it's fine. Falling in love weakens a woman, but building that love grants her strength. And once she gives birth, she becomes the strongest being in the world, or so my brother often told me."

Completely changed from the mournful mood from before, Kyousui's expression was clear.

"After all, you won't be able to live if you don't stop fretting."

"…Well, it's true that the energy of the housewives in the marketplace scares even me sometimes."

Izumi recalled the older women during limited-time sales. That impudent boldness of theirs was certainly fearsome.

"It sounds unpleasant to word it this way, but please become more shameless. During a famine there is certainly no room for pickiness, but things are different now. Isn't Your Highness' duty to work hard with King Cornou so that a famine never happens again?"

The Princess raised her head in realisation. Then, she slowly lowered her gaze, closed her eyes, and began to think.

"From the moment he was enthroned, King Cornou faced hardship after hardship. Yet despite that, he faced everything without faltering… I wanted to become his strength… But despite that, before I realised it, I was thinking about nothing except how I didn't want him to hate me."

Standing up, the Princess pulled Kyousui into a tight embrace.

“Thank you for being honest with me. I’ll try telling him, and I might be hated, but I’ll let him know that I’ll give my best.”

Under the bright red hair, Kyousui’s eyes widened. Eventually they narrowed as she nodded, and patted the Princess on the back, almost like an older sister praising her younger sister.

The mood kind of called for clapping, and it seemed like things were solved, so just as Izumi was wondering if she could close the window now, a large bang rang out.
The door was opened wide, and from it appeared the man from earlier, the child Hitow had saved, and finally a large stranger with a full beard.
The very moment that the door was shut, the bearded man bowed his head. As he did, Izumi caught a glimpse into the basket on his back.

“Princess Hitow, thank you very much for saving the life of my son.”

The small child bowed as well.

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Princess Hitow parted from Kyousui to walk to the boy’s side, and she bent down to meet eyes with him.

“You’re very welcome,” she said, ruffling the smiling boy’s head, as he seemed to find it ticklish.

“The fire’s gone,” started Kyousui’s husband. “Ah-, I didn’t say anything to the soldiers, okay? He said he wanted to thank her no matter what, so I brought him here, but… was that not okay?”

He looked at Kyousui to check her expression.

“No, it’s absolutely fine.”

Hearing Kyousui’s answer, a smile bloomed on his face.

“Thank goodness. You’re terrifying when you’re angry, Kyousui-san.”

If you put it nicely, the man was pure, but he was as unreliable as a person could get. Still, everybody had their own taste in romantic partners. As Izumi watched the couple nestle up together, she felt like she had been taught a lesson in the complexity of the human heart.

“Your Highness jumped into the fire yourself. Just how can I thank you? I will do anything in my power.”

In response to the bearded man’s sincere words, the Princess turned to face Izumi.

“If you want to thank somebody, thank Magician-dono. She lent me her cloak, even though it was more than luxurious enough to feed a family for a year.”

She knew it was expensive, but to think it was *that* expensive…
If, *just if,* she met with Huuron for a third time, what on earth was she supposed to she say?
As Izumi prayed that she never meet him again, the bearded man approached her.
From the basket on his back, he produced a pair of long scissors. The handle was quite lengthy, and closely resembled hedge-clippers.

“I used to use these, back when I was a craftsman. It’s the next important thing after my life. It can’t compare to that cloak, but please accept it.”

“No, taking something so important to you is a little…”

Izumi waved her hands and tried to refuse, but it caused the bearded man to frown.
Seeing that, Kyousui’s husband suddenly took the scissors.

“Mister Karasu…”

The bearded man gave him a look of relief.
Kyousui’s husband, Karasu, reverently presented the scissors to Izumi.

“Please accept it. If you decline due to kindness, Lady Magician, it will make him feel uncomfortable instead. And people often do say that things you receive without paying back for will end up hindering you, after all.”

Even so, Izumi wasn’t sure about it. But when she glanced at the man, she found that both he and the boy here bowing towards her. So she reached for the scissors. If it helped the man settle his heart, then that was what she would do.

“Stay safe.”

After waving at the boy, with the scissors in hand, Izumi shut the window.

Chapter 12

I know. I think I'll die.

The idea came to mind while Cornou was brushing his teeth after dinner.

It had been ten years since he became King. The whole time, he had hid his true self, and tried his best to wear the mask of a splendid ruler.
The nation had been struggling through a famine when he succeeded the throne.
When he did, he began to lower the taxes.
Cultivating the lands, endeavours with flood control, preparing for irrigation, adjusting and fixing laws… Seven years of wrestling with problems facing the nation until it could finally yield tax again. Even now, he was struggling with supporting education.

The nation finally saw the light of day.
The citizens sang praise of him. Lately, even people from the neighbouring countries praised him as a wise king.

More! Praise me more!

That had been his reaction until just three days ago.
But now, even praise seemed irritating.

To be honest, Cornou actually hated trouble. No, not just trouble either. Things that hurt, things that were difficult, things that were sad. Having to try hard, having to endure, having to work. Having to leave bed, having to concentrate, having to train. All these things he loathed. He even loathed to ride on the *ooma* when he toured the country by air, and he found that speaking to people was tiring as well.

If he could, he would prefer to hole up in his room and devote himself to his hobbies.

A man like him had faced the sly geezer politicians in nauseating battles of wit and otherwise. He had spent an entire ten years reforming the country. And the reason was very simply so that the woman he loved would look at him.

Even now, he recalled that day fifteen years ago when the two first met.
At the time, Cornou had just turned thirteen, and she had only been five.
The girl had climbed a tree without thinking, and was at wits end because she couldn't descend.
With fiery bright red hair, and bright blue eyes like a lake, her striking features made quite an impression.

At the time she had been an energetic child, befitting of her hair colour, and was the complete opposite of the intelligent but reclusive Cornou.
Their two fathers joked that if only they could split Cornou's wisdom and the girl's energy between them, they would be perfect.

He would see her once every few years, and with each time she would grow more beautiful, remaining lively as ever, and as time passed by his feelings towards her changed as well.
From a rash and noisy child, to a girl he considered his sister. And then from that little sister, to the girl he was in love with.

He wanted to match her.
He wanted to be worthy of her.
He wanted to improve the country, so that he could bring her here with pride.

With that in mind, Cornou put in his most hated 'effort', and hiding his real self, he played the perfect king.
Before long, his efforts yielded dividends, and when Hitow turned sixteen, he sent a marriage proposal, which her father, King of Sunayu, accepted with pleasure.
King Sunayu had wanted to marry them right that instant, but it was Cornou himself who asked to wait.

Hitow had been growing more beautiful by the day, and in fear of having her taken, Cornou had sent a proposal. Even so, his nation was not yet fit for her.

In the four years until their marriage, he would restore and develop his nation further.
When he imagined the life they would be living together, his steps became light, and even going outdoors turned from Hell to paradise. The shitty beard-geezers that would do nothing except complain even turned into stupid but adorable children to him.
And then finally, finally, when everything was ready to receive her…

'I would like to postpone our marriage. Having said that, you are already at the right age to marry. I am sure that you are in a rush to leave a successor. It would go against my good conscience to delay the birth of your heir due to circumstances within my own nation. If you desire to annul our engagement, that is also fine.'

When he had sent a message to inform her that the day of their marriage was arriving, the reply that he received caused the blood to drain from his face. Or rather, so much blood left his head that he fainted.
The letter said that she wished to postpone things, and yet she gave no reason. In other words, she simply wanted to annul their engagement.

What he did, what he ate, how he spent the last three days, he honestly had no memory of.
For three days he had been a shell, and only just now as he brushed his teeth, did his senses return to him.

Suddenly, nothing seemed to matter any more.
Going out was now nothing but a pain, and the bearded geezers were now scary again.

He was sick of it.
He was sick of all of it.
He was sick of giving his all and enduring everything.

A west wind began to blow. The decades of calm were over. The breeze had finally turned into a storm, and Cornou felt, no, he *knew*, that a maelstrom was coming.
He didn't think he would be able to weather the tempest without Princess Hitow.
So he decided he would disappear before the tempest ever came.

Cornou prepared a study rope.

After tugging it a few times to test its strength, he tossed it over a beam, and created a noose.
Standing atop a chair, he placed his neck through its ring.
All he had to do was kick the chair away, and all would be well. He would be free from all troubles.

Cornou closed his eyes.

"What are you doing!" rang a deep voice.

It belonged to a man who knew Cornou's true self; Baz, his trusted retainer.
Baz was the only person permitted to enter Cornou's quarters.
Just why was he here? Cornou had clearly told him that he needed to think, and that he wanted to be alone.

"Please stop this! You must stop this, please!"

Cornou didn't turn to face him.
He didn't want to end his own life before his friend, but at the same time, doing so would free Baz from this troublesome lord of his.
As small children, Baz would secretly eat his carrots for him. He would help clean up the bedwetting that continued until Cornou was ten. After Cornou became King, he would patiently wake up the lord that hated early mornings, and when Cornou made decisions that he personally hated, Baz would listen to his complaints until deep into the night.

Farewell, Baz. Please live for yourself, from now on.

Cornou took a deep breath,

-clang-

when suddenly a shining rectangle of light appeared with a clatter.

Cornou caught his breath.

It was a bright-lit rectangular space, that seemed to suspend in mid-air. And inside it, a woman. Her black, wet hair clung to her face, and eyes darker than the deepest night beheld him.

“Hii-!”

A small shriek escaped his throat.

“What horrid tye’ming,” groaned the low voice of the woman.

There was white froth all over her hair and her bare shoulders.

The moment he saw this, Cornou knew who she was. She was a woman who had crawled out from the land of the dead, deep beneath the earth. She was a spectre. And judging by the foam, she had come from the Froth Marsh Hell, where sinners drowned for eternity.

Suicide was forbidden. It was said that those who ended their own lives would never rejoin the circle of life, doomed to imprisonment in the depths of the earth. Cornou had always considered it a dated and ridiculous superstition, but now he loathed himself for his stupidity.

“I’m going to put on my Barth Rohb, so just stay there. Listen, okay? You absolutely can’t move from there!”

In other words, “You’d better not run from me.”

This spectre was here to drag him into the abyss.
His knees went weak, and then the strength left his legs. His teeth wouldn’t stay clamped, and clattered despite himself.
That trembling reached his whole body――――and so he lost balance.
The chair began to tilt, and the noose bit into his throat.

“King!”

He had forgotten about Baz due to the terror.

“Aahhh! I told you! I told you not to move! Aahh, geeezz, how am I supposed to dress myself while you’re like that! Umm, ummm, WHAT DO I DO!? AH-, I KNOW!”

The woman slithered through the entrance to the underworld.
Her hands grasped large scissors, the length of her upper arm.

“HIIIIIIII!”

Cornou tried desperately to right the chair. But his trembling legs wouldn’t listen to him, and the noose only tightened.

-pechan-

-pechan-

Water dripped from the woman as she approached.

Foam dripped from her hair and bare body, sullying the floor beneath her.

The scissors glinted in the light.

Cornou was about to wet himself.

The drenched arms found their way to Cornou’s legs.

It was over.

Cornou had found it scary when the geezers shouted. But they were nothing compared to the horror of this spectral woman.

He would have continued living even if it led to Princess Hitow’s rejection, had he known things would end up like this.

Cornou felt tears gathering in his eyes.

The woman placed a leg onto the slanted chair, and leapt up towards him.

The leg of the righted chair slammed noisily against the ground.

“GAHAH-!”

For a moment, the noose loosened, and air surged through his throat.

The woman climbed up, almost clinging to Cornou’s skin, as she raised the scissors in her hands.

It was impossible to even scream.

Cornou found himself frozen to the very core.

The honey-coloured body was pressed against him, its figure slender enough that he could have easily thrust her away. But despite that, he couldn’t muster the slightest resistance.

The blades now pointed above his head.

-snip-

Just as he registered the sound, the rope fell from above him. Having lost its support, Cornou fell from the chair.
Because he covered it at once, there was no injury to his head.
Still, his body had slammed against the floor.
The pain caused him to grimace as he began to sit up, when suddenly something soft fell from above.

“Owowow….”

It was the spectre woman.

“Ah-…”

By reflex he had supported her with his arm, but the sensation transmitted to his skin was surprisingly smooth.

Cornou flushed red.

It was saddening that for even a moment, a spectre had made him feel this way. More important still, was the fact that he had long pledged himself to Princess Hitow.

He pushed the soft body away from him.

And when he did, the woman blinked, and then…

“GYAAAAAAAAAH!”

Screamed.

“C-, CLOTHES! CLOTHES!”

The woman paled as she looked down at her body.

She’s a spectre, but she’s still a woman I guess, thought Cornou in a daze.

As he sat there vacantly, he saw her standing up in the corner of his gaze, before returning to the gate to the underworld.

But after only two, three steps, she turned on her heels, and returned to Cornou’s side.
Placing her hands on the noose around his neck, she glared at him resentfully and said,

“I’m confiscating this! I don’t know what happened, but you’re still young, so how about trying for a little longer?”

Still seated on the floor, Cornou simply nodded.
He had no idea why, but apparently she had given up on taking him to the underworld.
The woman ran across the wet floor, before jumping back into the rectangular door.
With the robe held by her chest, the now bright-red woman spoke to Cornou.

“This will *not* happen again, understood! This is too much for my emotions, so you’re going to have to help yourself.”

Again, Cornou nodded.

With a clatter, the door disappeared.

Cornou slowly closed his eyes, and then opened them.

Grey-white walls, and a window built into them. Through the window, verdant leaves rustling in the wind.

Things were back to normal.

The spectre had gone.

Cornou looked around the familiar room.

There was a saying that went, ‘once on shore, pray no more’.

Perhaps he might normally forget the terror, and wonder if it was all a dream, but the sharp blades of the large scissors seemed to caution him from the side, and neither had the froth disappeared from the floor.

Speaking of which…

Cornou turned around, and found Baz slumped against the wall in front of the doorway. Apparently his legs had given way. He was sitting there staring in the direction of the now-gone spectre, forgetting to even blink.

“Didn’t you need something?” asked Cornou.

“Y-, Yes. Right. That’s right.”

Still looking dazed, Baz turned to face Cornou.

“Princess Hitow is here.”

Cornou doubted his ears.

Although they had known each other for a long time, when royalty visited each other, they would always send a messenger, days in advance.
But this rashness was quite like her.
Without knowing, the corners of his lips rose into a smile.
She was probably here about the wedding.

Cornou stood up.
He lightly struck his clothes to straighten them out.

Perhaps Princess Hitow was here to cancel the engagement. If that was the case, perhaps she would spit harsh words of rejection at him. But mysteriously, he didn't think of running.

If there was something about him she didn't like, then all he had to do was correct it.
If the problem was actually on her side, then all they had to do was work together to fix it.
As long as she was there, effort, endurance, he would give it his all.
Once he imagined meeting that dreadful spectre again, it felt like there was nothing he couldn't do.

Heading to the doorway, he held out his arm to Baz.
After he pulled him up, he saw Baz's mouth wrinkle into a smile.

"I'm sure it's good news."

TL Note: Timing(taimingu) and Bathrobe(baasuroobu) are loanwords from English, so he can't make heads of tails of them.

Chapter 13

Izumi was soaking her body in the slightly shallow bath.
There was a little less water than usual, and it only came as far as her navel.

Today, on top of having to stand on the train, Izumi had spent her whole work day on her feet. In order to help the circulation of her legs, she was enjoying a bit of hot water.
Although she had heated her bathroom before she got in, at first the skin on her upper body was a little chilly.
Still, as time went by, her whole body began to warm up, and the discomfort in her calves seemed to melt away in the hot water.

Letting out a great sigh, she gave her weight to the bathtub behind her.
Baths truly had to be enjoyed like this. By no means were they to be taken with a swimsuit on.
She left her head against the rim, and as her gaze tilted back, the rope strung across the room came into view.

It was sturdy-looking, formed from a weave of orange and brown string, and an unlucky thing that had once been party to a suicide attempt.
Each time she saw the rope, Izumi recalled the sensation of the man's hand on her hips, and was forced to swallow down a scream.
The bathrobe that she had prepared to wear in case her window ever connected to that mysterious world again, had been completely useless. Not only that, it was thick, and on rainy days it wouldn't dry properly.

Thinking about it, each time her window connected to that world, its denizens were often in some form of crisis, and she wouldn't always have the leisure or time to put on her robe.
Having realised that, Izumi decided that starting tomorrow, she would wear a swimsuit to the bath.

She had bought the two-piece short sleeve and shorts swimsuit for her fitness club. But when she wore it to the shower, it would cling to her skin and felt terrible. Not only that, it covered a lot of skin, and it was annoying having to slide it around to clean beneath.

The next day, she dug deep into her closet to find her scantier bikini swimsuit.
Although it was much better than her fitness swimsuit, the experience was far from the relaxing time that Izumi was looking for.

A one-time shame days from now, versus her enjoyment today.

When she weighed them on the scales, it was the latter that won out.
She would hardly be fired from work just because the denizens of some strange world saw her naked, and it obviously wouldn't affect her friendships either. It was just, embarrassing.
She was embarrassed now that she knew she might see the same person again, but she could just bear the shame for a few minutes, and then grab a bath towel from the changing room once she knew what was going on.
Izumi convinced herself that, and decided to go back to enjoying her baths properly.

While trying her best not to see the rope and its gloomy presence, Izumi spaced out and enjoyed the water.
Sweat was forming at her brow. Just as she was half-standing, deciding that it was about time to leave…

-WHOOOOOOOOOOSH-

She heard the sound of something speeding past at incredible speeds.
Of course, it was impossible for anything to move like that in the narrow alley by her window.
She knew that the window had connected to somewhere again.

Izumi had enjoyed her bath plenty, already. And more importantly than anything, she was grateful to be rid of the rope.

She placed her hand to the window.
But the shame that she thought she had conquered, was giving her pause again.

Am I going to be stuck climbing over the window with everything completely exposed again?
Is it going to be a huge audience like the time with the arrijighock again?

But just like the time with the suicide attempt, it might have been a race against time again.
On the brink of making a decision, Izumi opened the window just a small bit, and peered beyond the window frame.

What she first noticed was a huge amount of water.
Water that spanned from left to right, and roared as it flowed across.
It was a river.
And quite a wide river at that.

After making sure that there wasn't anybody she could see, Izumi shifted the window again until it was half-open.
When she peered below, what she found was grass, swaying in the wind.
Apparently it was a grass field beneath her. On the other hand, there was a thick forest on the other shore, and the branches of trees hung over the water.
The water was muddy, perhaps due to recent rain, but 'scenic' was still the perfect way to describe it.

But still, she thought, as she cocked her head.
Far from somebody in need of a rope, there isn't a single person around.
Is there some mistake? she wondered, as she moved to shut the window.

"Ukoh-… goho-… sav-… gohoh-"

What reached her ears was a low scream, followed by coughing and a cry for help.

"Somebody-! …gahah-…"

Mixed in with the roaring water was the sound of intermittent screams, currently getting closer and closer.
Somebody was drowning!
Izumi immediately pulled down the rope.
After wrapping it around and around her left hand, she formed a loop, and began to swing it the way cowboys did in the movies.

Very soon, the person came into view.
An old man with white clothes, white hair, and a white beard, was waving his arms about as he bobbed up and down the water.
Izumi was stunned.
The old man was being washed down the middle of the river; much too far for the length of her rope to reach.
No, even if it *was* long enough, with Izumi's strength it was impossible to pull him to her side.
Would she be forced to watch helplessly as the old man washed down the river?

Feeling frustrated, Izumi leant out the window and looked about.
And what she found was a fallen tree, locked between two boulders, that the old man had luckily attached himself to.
It was an impressive feat to hang on in the rapid currents, but it wouldn't last for long.

"HANG ONN!" she screamed.

Noticing her voice, the old man looked up, only to widen his eyes in disbelief.
If somebody saw a naked goddess, floating above the grass plains, they'd be shocked too.
But this time, it was Izumi's turn for shock.
After flashing a toothy smile at Izumi, the old man raised his right hand to wave at her.
Izumi couldn't believe her eyes. Just who on earth wanted those courtesies right now.

It was naturally impossible for him to hang on with the one arm, and so the old man was once more swept off by the river.

Fortunately, although perhaps the situation could also be called unfortunate, the dead tree forced his body onto a boulder.
He lay atop the rock, breathing heavily.

Although she had managed to avoid the worst case scenario, the old man was still stuck in the centre of the river.

I guess I really should find something.

In order to tell the man to "Wait a moment," Izumi cupped her mouth with her two hands, before taking in a deep breath.
But her voice was drowned out by loud thumping that rumbled alongst the ground.
With her hands still stuck to her face, Izumi turned her head towards the sound――――upstream to her right.
Two horse-like creatures covered head-to-toe in long hairs, and two humans straddling those things.
Both were young men, and whilst one sported long, blonde-hair that he tied behind his head, the other had unkempt hair, like he had given up on the act of combing.
Stopping before her eyes, the blonde man dismounted the horse-thing. The moment his feet touched the ground, he shouted at the old man.

"Old Maestro!! Are you safe!"

Apparently he was familiar with the old man. Izumi gave a sigh of relief.
As for the old man, sitting atop the rock, he scowled when he saw the blonde man.

"Did I not tell you to desist from calling me 'Old Maestro'!"

"Please listen! Please don't move from that spot, Old Maestro!"

"I told you! Don't call me 'Old Maestro'!"

While the two were busy with their skit-like conversation, the frizzled-haired man descended from his horse-thing before promptly removing the bridle.

-shan-

Rang the bell that hung across its ears.
Around the time he was done with the first beast's bridle, the man noticed Izumi. His eyes immediately sparkled, and then he gave a slight bow.
Seeing that, Izumi greeted him back.
The man quickly parted his eyes from her, and worked on getting the other bridle off as well, before tying them together.

"Aloma, take off your coat," he said to the blonde man――Aloma――as he took off his own coat.

"Hah!?"

Aloma turned around with a suspicious expression.

"It isn't long enough."

Aloma's gaze first went to the makeshift rope in his hands, before immediately moving to Izumi behind him.

"Wha-, an angel!?"

This made the third time that Izumi had been called at angel.
Looking carefully, she felt that their features resembled that of the armoured man.
The blonde man kneeled on the spot.

"O Angel. Would it not be possible to delay your escort of the Old Maestro? The King desires that he sculpt the tragorn-slaying hero, and compose a song to praise him. I beseech you postpone things until he completes his final job."

"Don't say something unlucky like 'last job'! And also, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'Old Maestro' before you understand."

Ignoring the old man in the background, Aloma pulled at the cuff of the other man's pants.

“Oi, Solt. You beg the angel too.”

The frizzled-haired man——Solt——lightly lowered his head as he stretched the bridle.

“Please wait until I collect my payment.”

“U-, Ummm…”

It’s him, *right?* thought Izumi, after hearing about the trangorn-slaying hero, but the rest of the conversation lost her. Was it another skit of some sort?

“Um, if the length of your rope isn’t enough, please take this. It should be stronger than your coat at least.”

She decided to first hand over the suicide rope.

“Oohh, my sincere thanks for your mercy!”

Aloma lowered his head down to the ground.
Standing up with vigour, he turned to the old man on the river.

“Old Maestro! The angel has postponed it.”

“Umm, I didn’t actually come here to reap his life or anything…”

“Once we save you, please complete that statue and song.”

“Umm, like I said…”

He was completely convinced that she was an angel here to take the old man to heaven.

Pulling back the hand she had stretched to Aloma, Izumi sighed. She recalled the armoured man’s wife. Was it perhaps a trait of this country to ignore what others were saying?

While the two were beginning another “Don’t call me ‘Old Maestro’!” skit, the frizzy-haired Solt took the rope from Izumi’s hands.

“I will be borrowing this.”

He tied it to the makeshift rope, before stretching it violently enough that it made a sound.

“We somehow managed to make it long enough. Move, Aloma. Old Maestro! Here it comes!”

After forming a loop with the rope, he tossed it towards the old man.
It landed splendidly on the old man’s rock.

“Please put the ring around your body,” shouted Solt as he wound the rope.

The old man stepped head-first into the noose. When Solt confirmed that he had fixed it tightly beneath his chest, he braced himself.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“Oi!”

Aloma grabbed a rope in a panic to assist.
The old man took a deep breath, gripped the rope strongly, checked the temperature of the water with his feet, and then leapt into the river.

The rope immediately strained.
For a moment, the old man’s body bent, before approaching the shore.
Aloma and Solt continued to pull, like a tug of war.
Izumi saw the old man’s hand grip the grass on the river bank.
With one last strong brace, Solt pulled the old man onto the shore with one final tug.

Now that she was sure that he was safe, Izumi quickly rushed into the changing room.
She wrapped a large bath towel around her body and turned to the bathroom to find that the sitting old man was now standing up.
Smoothing his white moustache, the old man walked towards her.

“Thank you, little miss angel.”

No sooner had he said that did the old man pull her shoulders towards him, quickly landing a kiss by her eyes.

“N-, No. You’re welcome.”

His movements had been incredibly practised. His smile was refreshing, and he seemed relaxed even in his old age. He was probably quite popular in his youth.

“Perverted geezer,” muttered Solt.

“I never imagined that an angel would be as lovely as you. The heavens must be as wonderful as the church says. I had lamented my old body, and the little time I had left, but it seems that was an incredible mistake.”

Even though he almost certainly heard Solt, the old man ignored him, and stroked Izumi’s hand.
Mysteriously, she felt no discomfort. Was it because he was an old man?”

“Ummm, I’m not actually here because I’ve come for you or anything, so let’s leave the heaven talk for some other time. Earlier, that trangorn-slaying hero you mentioned. Are you talking about the knight that came from the countryside?”

“You are well informed. Quite right. Right now he serves as Knight Captain in the capital.”

“I knew it!”

Izumi placed her remaining hand over his.

“So how is he? Did he make up with his wife?”

Although he had smiled broadly when her hand covered his, her following words made him frown.

“That man had a wife?”

“Eh… Yes, in his hometown. There was a bit of a misunderstanding, so he left his wife behind to go hunt the trangorn. Umm, did she not arrive in the Capital?”

The corners of his mouth turned down into a tight frown.

“I hear that the man is currently engaged to the princess of Jebas. OF all things, to think that he had a wife in his hometown is… Truly a disgrace. Aloma, I will be rejecting this job after all.”

“You can’t reject it. It’s a direct order from the King, you know!?” Aloma screamed.

“I didn’t like it from the start. My voice exists to spread praise and appreciation of female beauty, not to sing about men. My sculpting is the same. What’s supposed to be fun about carving muscular men in armour.”

“He isn’t just some muscular man. He succeeded in a trangorn slaying; something that hasn’t happened in centuries. Isn’t he the hero that even brought back its heart? He’s incredibly popular amongst the people right now, and blacksmiths are being flooded with requests to make swords in the design of the mysterious sword that an angel besto————angel?”

As Alome fervently persuaded the old man——who was apparently a hardcore womaniser——he seemed to notice something as he looked at Izumi.

“It couldn’t be that the angel that bestowed the treasured Keropii Sword upon Arshu-sama, was you?”

“Eh-, treasured!?”

Arshu was probably Armour. To think that that keropii sword had ended up classified as a treasured sword.

“Is that wrong?”

“Well, no, I guess it isn’t, maybe.”

It wasn't her sword to begin with, and neither was it a treasured sword, but it was true that she had given it to him.

"I knew it. Did you hear, Old Maestro? The man is a hero who received a sword from this angel, and was led to victory by her. And right now that very same angel has saved your life. I really don't think that anybody can write the song but you."

"Fumu. I do not mind carving the scene of the angel granting him the sword… But I have no intentions of writing a song."

Upon hearing that there might be a statue of her, a stiff smile appeared on Izumi's face. Could it be that she would be stark naked there as well? Having listened quietly so far, Zolt cut in with a "However".

"If Arshu-sama truly has a wife, then things are dire. Bigamy is one of the 49 Deadly Sins."

"49? That's quite a lot, isn't it."

"Yes, we have a lot of commandments, starting with 'Thou shalt not invade other countries'. Those who violate the commandments, even the King, will be punished. Is Arshu-sama truly married?"

She was actually curious about what the other 47 were, but now wasn't the time for that. It would be terrible if Armoured Man was punished.

"No, that was just in the beginning, so he should be divorced right now. Ummm, do you guys acknowledge divorces?"

"Is that how it was? Yes, there is no problem if he is divorced."

Both Solt and Aloma let out a sigh of relief.

"But you know," continued Izumi, "he had a reason for it, you know? Arshu, was it? Because his wife had a weak body, he declined the subjugation mission at first. But the messenger from the King got him drunk, and apparently threw him into a brothel. And his wife found out and got mad, driving him out of the house. Or so Arshu thought, but actually

she didn't have much longer to live, so thinking about her husband's future, she decided to step down. But then various things happened, and her body was healed, so she set out on a journey to find her husband in the Capital… Or at least I thought she did."

Did she not end up going? She seemed so happy after she was healed too.

"Aha. So those are the circumstances behind that muscled man. I always wondered how he could be in line for the throne, and still always look so gloomy," nodded Solt, after some particularly honest commentary.

Izumi was relieved. From what Solt said, it seems that Arshu hadn't had a change of heart or anything.

"Could it be that his wife arrived at the Capital, only to hear rumour about his marriage with the Princess?"

Izumi facepalmed. It sounded entirely possible. If it was that woman, then it was entirely possible that she would step down again after hearing about a marriage with a princess. Was it already too late?

"Hey, could it be that he really is engaged now? Also, Arshu might not seem happy, but what about the Princess?"

"It isn't final, but I heard that the one pushing it was the King himself, so it should only be a matter of time. Arshu-sama certainly looked gloo- …I mean, I never saw him smile, so perhaps he still has feelings for his old wife."

Then what about the last concerned party, the Princess?

"The Princess… is still only nine years of age, and I do not believe she understands anything that is going on yet."

"Hah? Nine?"

Even at best, Arshu was in the first half of his twenties. A nine-year-old and somebody in their twenties. Izumi thought it was absurd, but then perhaps political marriages were just like that.

But still, to think this happened. I even healed her and everything.

While she wondered if there was anything that could be done, a certain idea came to mind. Izumi looked at the silently sulking old man.

"…Um, you're going to write a song, right?"

"No, I will not."

With a frown, he turned the other way.

"Didn't I say that you couldn't refuse!?"

Aloma rebuked him, but the old man just grew more stubborn.

"Won't you write a song for us?"

"A song about a fool who was tricked by the King's messenger, and then left his wife behind?"

The old man had apparently already no intention of doing it. He seemed to find it so stupid that he was liable to pick his nose at any time.

"No, about the tragic love of a hero who separated from his wife to go on a dangerous mission."

"You must be very famous if the King is asking for you personally. If you sing about Arshu and his wife's tragic love, I think the hearts of the King and the citizens might even be moved."

The King obviously had his own plans, so that was probably impossible, but if they had the huge support of all the people, then perhaps they could change something.

"That may be a good idea," agreed Aloma.

"Didn't you say that I couldn't disobey the King?" glared the old man.

“What are you saying. The King simply said that he wanted a song of praise written about the Hero Arshu and his subjugation of the trangorn. Not once did he say that you were not to sing about the beloved he left in his hometown. You wouldn’t be disobeying him.”

“At worst, you wouldn’t get a reward for it,” added Solt, apparently onboard.

“To be honest, even if Arshu-sama is a hero, I didn’t really agree with marrying him to a nine-year-old princess.”

Not everybody could simply accept it because it was a political marriage.

“I’m sure the King is anxious. The Prince ran away to another country, and so his successor is the Princess alone,” said Aloma with a meaningful gaze.

“How pitiful the Princess must be. As the one who tempted the Prince with tales of the fraud, Conyork the Second, you must surely be feeling guilty, Old Maestro,” continued Solt.

Apparently this old man had a deep relationship with the Prince and Princess.

“Gununu,” he groaned.

“Will you not do so for the Princess instead? Think about that beautiful face, despite her age. She will surely become a beautiful woman of your taste in the future.”

“Hmph. I doubt I’ll be alive at that point!”

After cursing, the old man gave a deep sigh.

“Eei! I just have to write a song, right?”

“As expected of Old Maestro!”

“This is why I cannot quit being your disciple.”

“Thank you, Old Maestro.”

Izumi, followed by Aloma and Solt all gave their cheers.

He frowned again.

“I told you not to call me ‘Old Maestro’.”

“Ah-, sorry.”

The moment that Izumi bowed to him, something suddenly forced its way past her side.

“Wawah-!” she screamed, before looking to her side.

The horse-thing had thrust its nose into her bathroom window.
It stretched its head to drink from her bathwater, but when it realised it couldn’t reach, it began licking at the water droplets on the wall instead.

“Stop that! You’ll go to heaven!”

Aloma pulled at its hair in a panic, but the horse-thing showed no signs of stopping.
Perhaps he had lost control because it no longer had reigns, but the horse-thing was just doing as it liked. It was only when Aloma and Solt both pulled at the hair on its neck that it let out a neigh of dissatisfaction, before backing away. The bell rang **-shan-** again, as it got caught on the window frame.

“Excuse us, O Angel. Please do not worry about the issue with Arshu-sama!”

No sooner had Aloma finished shouting, Solt placed his hand on the window.

-shan-

The bell rang as it dropped into the water, and at the same time, the window closed.

Chapter 14

The air was thick with the scent of plants.
Vines grew thickly between the trees, hampering the way forward, whilst the undergrowth reached as far as the hips.
Because he hadn't had water, his throat was parched and his rough breaths seemed to burn.

The sun had almost set. His visibility was already compromised in this thick forest.
Before the dark came, he had to find her.
The howls of a *kelheross* reached Hiqyuu's ears, and his body shook in fright.
Although he turned around to look, all he found was thick greenery. Just as he was feeling relieved, the howl came again.
It was closer than before.
It was a solemn yet ferocious roar.
It seemed to be telling this poor intruder that it was the king of the forest.

Even whilst Hiqyuu was dealing with his fear, the cries of these rulers of the night forest continued to approach.
A chill ran down his spine.
He turned around again, and his trembling legs broke into a sprint.

"Princess! Where are you!? Princess!"

As he thought about her lustrous hair, silver like the light of the stars, he continued to shout for her.

"Princess!!"

"Princess? What princess?"

“Hii-!”

The moment he heard the sudden woman’s voice, a bright light shone into the darkness of the forest.
In his surprise, Hiqyuu bumped into a tree branch, and bounced off it onto the ground.

“Ah, sorry for surprising you.”

While bearing the pain of his forehead, Hiqyuu looked up and found a woman amongst the tree branches. Her skin was honey-coloured, and the smooth lines of her body were characteristic of a woman’s figure. From between the arms folded across her chest, protruded soft swells that he could almost see.
——Why was there a naked woman in a *kelheross-inhabited* forest!?

“It looks like I’m pretty high up, huh. I wonder why it opened up here.”

She leant out of her shining rectangle, and looked down from above.
And Hiqyuu, he looked back, in disbelief.
The woman looked about the area, and tilted her head in puzzlement. It was around then that she seemed to notice him and opened her mouth to speak.

“Ah. There you were. Hey, you there, you’re looking for a princess, right? Can I ask whose princess?”

“Eh-, that is, Princess Aqua of Jebas…”

“I knew it,” said the woman, and she struck her palm.

“I thought that might be the case,” she continued with a happy smile. While Hiqyuu looked at the woman’s carefree smile, he heard a cry again.

Right! I have to find the Princess!

Having come back to his senses, he stood up in a hurry.

-shan-

Something sounded from above.

“OW!”

Or so he was thinking, when his head was suddenly wracked with pain. It wasn’t terribly painful, but it was very surprising, so in reflex he held his head as he squatted.

“Aahh, it dropped. Sorry, again.”

Apparently the woman in the air had dropped it.
His eyes were teary. As he looked around the ground, a shining bell came into his blurry view.

“This is…”

“Do you need it? I’m not sure if it’ll help at all though.”

“It will help! It will most definitely help!”

Hiqyuu stood up with bell in hand.

“Eh? It *will*?”

-shan shan shan-

A clear and refreshing sound reverberated through the forest. There was no mistake. This was a *kelheross*-repelling bell.

“Miss! I will be borrowing your bell!”

“Sure, sure.”

The woman readily agreed.

“Thank you very much. Now then, to find the Princess…”

Just as he was about to run off, Hiqyuu stopped in shock. Before he had noticed, the sun had fully set. Because of the thick canopy, even the

moonlight didn't shine through. He could see right now because of the woman above him, but it began pitch dark only a few steps away.

"…This can't be."

He wouldn't be able to search for her.
As he was trapped in despair, the cries of the *kelheross* came again.
They were even closer.
It was no use. He wouldn't be able to find her.
While he was stumbling around in the darkness, a voice from above came.

"Aren't you going to go find the Princess?"

The somewhat leisurely voice touched a nerve, and he yelled up in anger.

"I *want* to! But in this darkness…! Damnit…!"

"Oh, that's true! It's pitch dark, isn't it."

Could this woman even feel panic?

Hiqyuu was being eaten away by anxiety, and felt powerless like a mountain was in his way, but seeing this endlessly easygoing woman shocked him into calm instead.

Princess Aqua was known for being a tomboy.
Today she had escaped via tree, from a window on the third floor. Nobody had noticed her. Had it been the second floor, everybody would have been on guard, but they mistakenly assumed that it would be fine on the third.

Hiqyuu who had noticed her absence early on let the court ladies know, before rushing ahead of the knights. Urging his *horzh* forward, he had followed eyewitness reports and found himself at the forest.
It was on a forest branch that he noticed one of her hair ornaments as well as trodden undergrowth and broken branches, so he followed them in.

She was only nine, and it was no easy feat for her small legs to traverse the forest. He should have been catching up. And not only that, she was a better

tree climber than even sons from knight families. If she heard the howls of *kelheross*, she would definitely be in a tree right now.

Should I walk around ringing the bell, or should I resume my search in the morning?

While Hiqyuu was at a loss,

-dossu-

he heard the sound of something falling by his feet.

“Use that.”

It was the woman’s voice. Hiqyuu fearfully picked up the object.
It looked like a red cylinder. On one end, some black material fanned out.
What on earth was this?

“There should be a black bump, right? Press it for me.”

Turning the cylinder around, he found that there really was a bump. He did as he was told.
Suddenly, light short forth from the fanned end.

“Uwah-!”

He threw the cylinder by reflex.

“Ah-, hey! You’re going to break it!”

“Wha-, wha-wha-wha-wha-what is that!?”

“A *flashlait*. Ummm. I know! This is one of the Seven Tools of the Heavens, and because of its heavenly blessing, it can shine light.”

Was it his imagination that her explanation felt entirely fake?

“Anyway, it’s nothing dangerous, so relax.”

He didn’t think it was at all possible to relax the way she said things, but it was true that he needed a torch.

Hiqyuu poked at the *flashlait* with his feet. It simply rolled, without change.

“Umm, I *did* tell you that it was safe, didn’t I? Come on, shouldn’t you be believing the words of an angel?”

“Angel!?”

Hiqyuu looked up at the woman.

This naked lady is an angel?

Her suspicious explanation gave him pause, but he had no basis with which to reject her claims.

“I see… So you were an angel…”

Gulping, he picked up the *flashlait*.
He pointed it and illuminated the forest.

“O Angel. Are you lending this to me?”

“That’s right. Ah-, if you find the Princess, mind bringing her back to me? There’s something I want to ask her.”

“I understand. I shall definitely find her and bring her here!”

With *flashlait* in on hand, and whilst ringing the bell in the other, Hiqyuu set off.

He carefully proceeded through the forest, making sure not to overlook any clues.
Now that he was calm again, thanks to the angel, he noticed that the broken branches couldn’t be because she simply bumped into them.
She had broken them as markings. Otherwise, the broken branches were too thick to explain. He continued to follow them.

“Oh? It really *was* Hiqyuu. What’s the matter?”

It was when his voice was growing hoarse, and he could start to taste blood, that he heard the Princess’ even *more* carefree voice.

“…Prin, cess…”

Just as he thought, she was up in a tree. With agility that would put a *mankii* to shame, the girl descended to greet him.

“…Not ‘what’s, the… matter’…”

While he was breathing heavily, she thrust a leather bag at him.

“How about a drink first? Your voice sounds terrible, you know?”

There was plenty he wanted to say. But with his throat the way it was, he wouldn’t be able to say half of it. Accepting the flask from her, he moistened his throat.

“Hahh, thank you for that.”

It hurt a lot less now.

“Honestly, I’m shocked. You came into the forest without even preparing water? Or food? Or a compass? Or… well, I guess you’d have at least a *kelheross-repelling bell*, huh.”

Laughing, the Princess added, “If you told me that you didn’t even bring that, I wouldn’t know what to say anymore.”

Hiqyuu experienced a never-before-felt sense of weariness.

“Princess, why did you leave the castle? And what’s more, to do something as unthinkable as entering the forest by yourself!”

“I prepared properly, you know? Unlike *you*.”

Hmhmn! proudly hummed the Princess. Hiqyuu bore with the urge to drive his head into a tree.

“Anyway, please return!”

“More importantly, you’ve got something interesting there, don’t you. What is this?”

Ignoring Hiqyuu, who was angry like a furious *rekyuw*, the Princess pointed at the *flashlait* with sparkling eyes.

“Hey, hey, can I touch it?”

Due to her arrogance as royalty, she snatched the *flashlait* without waiting for an answer.

“Amazing. It’s shining. Could this be the moonstone that was mentioned in the notes of Conyork the Second?”

“It isn’t. This is one of the Seven Tools of the Heavens that I received from an angel, the *flashlait*.”

The Princess gripped it tightly in her two hands.

“You met an angel!? That’s amazing, Hiqyuu!”

Her face seemed to float in the darkness, as it was illuminated from below. Even though ten out of ten people would agree that her face was adorable, right now it seemed eerie enough that he had to bite down a scream.

“Yes, well, she wants to meet you, and is currently waiting for you. I must also return the *flashlait*. Now then, please return with me.”

After taking the *flashlait* back from her, Hiqyuu took her hand and led her into the forest.

Even from afar, it was easy to tell where the angel was.
After all, it shone brilliantly in the darkness of the forest.

“It really is an angel!”

Hearing the Princess’ excited shout, the angel noticed them and waved her hand.

“Welcome back. I’m glad it didn’t take half an hour.”

Unlike when they parted, the angel was now clothed in a white robe.

“By the way, some stray dogs have been loitering about, you know? When you guys came, they ran off somewhere though.”

By stray dogs, could she mean the kelheross*?*
To think that she would group dogs together with the kelheross*, the envoys of hell, and the kings of the forest…*

Hiqyuu gulped. Perhaps to angels, the denizens of the heavens, a *kelheross* was no different to a powerless pup.
It was a little late, but Hiqyuu finally felt the fear and awe.
He knelt, and then lowered his head.

“I have brought with me Princess Aqua, of Jebas. Because of your assistance, O Angel, I was able to rescue her without problem. I, Hiqyuu, express my humble thanks.”

“Aahh, umm, well, mn. I don’t really get it, but it’s great that you found her. By the way, isn’t it dangerous to be sitting around there? If there are wild dogs around then it’ll be dangerous to walk about, so how about you climb a tree or something first?”

“My, it is all right to approach your honoured side?”

No sooner has the Princess said that, did she smoothly climb up a tree.

“What are you doing, Hiqyuu. Hurry up and come.”

In an instant, she arrived at a branch close to the angel, and yelled at him.

He was assailed by an indescribable sensation, like all the power had been taken from his body. He was about to sigh again, but stopped himself, and moved his hand to a tree.
There was not one of her retainers who could not climb trees. The Princess hated studies and etiquette, and would often disappear. Because of that, the main job of the retainers was actually to climb trees on the palace ground to find her.

After clambering onto the branch next to the Princess', Hiqyuu respectfully presented the *flashlait* to the angel.

"The *flashlait* that you mercifully lent to me. Please take it back."

"Thanks for that."

After taking it back, the angel turned to the Princess.

"You're the Princess of Jebas, yes?"

"Yes! My name is Aqua. That I was not only able to meet you, but to even be spoken to brings me undeserved honour."

The Princess gave a skilful curtsy atop the tree branch.

If only even a tenth of that skill went towards her etiquette lessons… he couldn't help but think.

"There's something I'd like to check with you. First, do you know of Knight Captain Arshu?"

"Ar-"

Arshu-sama!? he wanted to shout, but he covered his own mouth. Right now that name was taboo around the Princess.

"Goodness, Angel-sama, you know of that muscle brain?"

He could understand how she felt. But it was really too much to talk about the trangorn-slaying hero that way.

“Princess… I am sure I have warned you countless times not to speak that way.”

“Goodness, please excuse me. Angel-sama, you know of that Jebas Knight Captain who loves training his muscles so much that even his intracranial space has been filled with muscle?”

Nothing had changed.

Hiqyuu rubbed his temples to help his headache.

“Princess… That is the same as before.”

“I changed it. What do you want me to call him then? The paedophile who wants to marry me?”

Princess Aqua turned her head away in a dignified harrumph. Seeing as how she had no intentions of changing, it became harder and harder to restrain his sighs.

“Princess…”

“Thank goodness.”

While Hiqyuu was about to reprimand her again, a cheerful voice cut him off.

“It looks like you don’t think much of him, then.”

“Eh?”

“Goodness?”

Hiqyuu and the Aqua let out surprised cries.

“You see, he actually has a sweetheart in his hometown. So I actually wanted none other than you, to be against a marriage with him. But Arshu is pretty good looking, and he’s a hero now too, so I was wondering what I would do if you liked him, but thankfully it looks like that’s no problem.”

Certainly, even a man like Hiqyuu felt that Arshu held charm. But that was because of his age and position. To the nine-year-old Aqua, he was nothing more than an old, boring adult.

“Angel-sama! Please let me hear more about this!” started Aqua, “Even if I die, I don’t want to have to marry that gorilla-man without knowing true love. Even now… I have run into the forest because I heard I was to have dinner with the Knight Captain!”

I knew it.

So that was why she left the castle.
Hiqyuu looked at the Princess’ innocent profile. There was no way he didn’t feel pity for the girl that was being forced into an unwanted marriage.

“Ummm, it’s a bit hard to say to you, Princess, but he was actually tricked by a messenger of the King, and ended up being left by his wife. And so he’s probably quite depressed right now, right? But actually, his wife actually left him because she had her own circumstances, but since those circumstances were resolved, she left for the Capital to chase after Arshu. But then, when she arrived, the marriage between you and Arshu was the talk of the town…”

After stopping for a while, the angel struck her palm with a **-pan-**

“And so, the Old Maestro who the King wanted to compose a song about Arshu, agreed to help me! He’s going to write a song about the tragic love of Arshu’s wife, and get the citizens on her side. But I don’t think that alone would be enough.”

“Goodness, the Old Maestro is?”

Hiqyuu was dumbfounded by the strange turns of this story. Arshu had a lover, this angel was plotting to cancel the engagement, and the Old Maestro was a collaborator?

“I shall help! Please allow me to help!”

Unlike the confounded Hiqyuu, the Princess immediately got on-board.

“It really helps that you say that. Aloma thought that you wouldn’t know a thing. But it looks like he shouldn’t have made light of you, just because you were nine.”

“Goodness, Aloma said such a thing? The next time I see him, I really must investigate this.”

“B-, But Princess, how…”

The Princess had been against the marriage the whole time. But the King had never changed his mind. As far as he could tell, there was nothing she could do.
But the Princess gave a smile brimming with confidence.
That haughty smile of hers had a strange way of charming people.

“By doing this.”

No sooner had she said that, the Princess produced a dagger from her pocket.

“What are you doing!”

Hiqyuu immediately reached out for it.
But they were standing on unstable tree branches. He stumbled. While he was struggling with his balance, Princess Aqua placed the blade against the long hair by her back.
The waist-length hair shone before his eyes, and in the next instant, was cut to the short length of a commoner boy’s.

“W-, What have you done. The silver hair that is proof of royalty… The symbol of your noble lineage…”

Only royalty had this silver hair, and it was subject to the awe and respect of the people. Not only that, but to a lady, her hair was more important than her life.
To have cut that hair was…

To think that he allowed something like this to happen before his eyes… The image of the enraged King was vividly displayed in his mind.

“Aahh, that’s better. I’ve always wanted to try giving it a cut. Well? With this hair, it’s impossible to get married. Far from that, I doubt I’ll be allowed out in public until it grows back.”

“Indeed…”

All the blood had left his face. But suddenly remembering his uncle, he realised that he could still be saved!

“Please hand me that hair!”

“Eh? Why?”

Hiqyuu entreated the puzzled Princess.

“We can make a wig from that hair. I know a skilled craftsman.”

It was the one his uncle used.

“Goodness, you’re so stubborn. I’ll do this then.”

The bundle of hair in her hands was thrust towards the angel.

“Angel-sama. Please accept my hair.”

“Eh-… EHHHH!?”

The angel who had been watching on blankly now let out a cry of surprise.

“Are you sure? Or rather, I suppose it’s a bit late for that, but… Hmmmm, looks like you’ve made up your mind, huh.”

The angel took the hair that was half forced onto her.

“Please wait! Please, leave that hair with us.”

“Well then, Angel-sama! Burn it, cook it, please do as you will. Now then, so that Hiqyuu will give up, please hurry back to the heavens.”

“Y-, Yeah. Well then, ummm, do your best, okay?”

“Please wait!”

Before his outstretched fingertips, as though some stage curtain had been drawn, the angel simply disappeared.
Hiqyuu could hear the sound of his life ending.

Chapter 15

Izumi loved to bathe.
In the sultry summers when it felt like she would boil. In the winters when it felt like even her bones would freeze. And naturally, even in spring and autumn, she continued to enjoy her baths.
Even on days when nothing went right, just the smell of soap could lift her spirits.
The moment that her body submerged into hot water, it felt like her troubles and fatigue simply disappeared.

And today too, she looked forward to bath time.
But the moment that she opened the door and her foot touched the cold floor, Izumi let out a great sigh.
Even though it should never have been in her bathroom to begin with, right now it was the first thing that entered her gaze.
In her experiences thus far, she had been given a lot of hard-to-deal with things, but this one surpassed them all.

"…What am I supposed to do with this."

Izumi even forgot to turn the shower on, as she muttered.

Beautiful, shining silver hair. It was the symbol of the Jebas Royal Family, and considering its volume, had apparently been grown to that length with much care.

Izumi tried to put it into a bucket, but there was so much that it wouldn't fit.
After a lot of thinking, she just placed it into a transparent garbage bag.
She really didn't know what to do with it. Keeping it took up space, and she had to be careful not to damage it either. But there was an even bigger problem.

Through her experiences thus far, she learnt that what she gained in the previous meeting would be useful in the next.
In that case, she was worried she would meet Hiqyuu, who wanted this hair the most. Thanks to that, she hadn't opened the window even once.
But when she met them last night, there was one thing she noticed.
Apparently, the window often opened to somebody she wanted to see.

When she met the stranded man, and she was worried for his safety, the window opened up to Prime Minister Teo Keh.

When she met with Yeti Setsugen, and she felt sorry for doing something bad to him, she ended up saving his sister.

When she met with armoured guy Arshu, and she was wondering if he reconciled with his wife, the window opened to the woman herself.

When she met Prince Hinoki trapped in the tower, and she was feeling worthless about being unable to save him, she was able to pass the key to people who wanted to save him.

When the Yohk'Zai delegation fell into Queen Akka's trap, and she wanted them to help Prince Hinoki, in the end she met with them too.

And finally, when she met with the Old Maestro, and heard about Arshu's marriage with the Princess, when she wondered about how the Princess felt, she was able to meet with her too.

After so many times, could you still call it coincidence?

The window would connect Izumi to those she strongly wanted to meet.
Then in that case, was it possible that it would avoid the people she *didn't* want to meet…? Or so thought Izumi.
But the problem was that Izumi couldn't imagine anybody who would want this hair except for Hiqyuu.

——After all, was there any use for hair except for making a wig?

Not only that, but apparently this silver colour was rare enough that it was treated as a symbol of royalty. And truly, out of all the people Izumi had ever met, only Princess Aqua had possessed silver hair.
Izumi turned on the shower, careful to avoid getting the bag wet as much as possible.

While being careful not to get suds everywhere, Izumi finished washing her head and body before getting into the bath.

But it wasn't working. She wasn't relaxing.

It might be a different story if she was in an onsen or public bath, but why, in her own home, did she have to worry about other people seeing her?

Izumi poked a wet finger at the hair through the bag.
To be honest, getting rid of it was easy. She only had to take it outside.

But once she considered that somebody other than Hiqyuu might need it, she was hesitant. Not only that, but she couldn't bring herself to simply destroy such beautiful hair.

Izumi looked up at the window, and gulped.
Would it connect to Hiqyuu, or somebody else?
It was a match between her and Hiqyuu.
A match to see whose desire was stronger.
――She had a good feeling she would lose though.

She wanted Arshu and Utaseyu to be happy together. She wanted Princess Aqua to be fine with this, and find her own partner. These feelings weren't a lie. But when she recalled Hiqyuu's tragic expression when they parted, she thought that perhaps his feelings were stronger.
Having said that though, she couldn't just keep the window closed forever.
As though the world had heard her thoughts, a sound came from beyond the window.
She could hear a number of people whispering to each other.
The contents of their whispers weren't audible, but she could tell that they weren't the voices of her neighbours.

If it was Hiqyuu, she was going to immediately shut the window.
Having found her determination, Izumi opened the window.

“…I won.”

She had never met these people before.
A middle-aged woman, a young woman, and a child.
The middle-aged woman was lying atop some bedding on the stone floor.
Behind her, the other two sat on a carpet the size of a tatami mat.

TL Note: A tatami mat size is 85.5cm wide and 179cm in length (about 33.5 by 70.5 inches)

“Hello. Is anybody in need of help?”

She tried speaking to them, but Izumi was in confusion.
All three of the people staring at her speechless had a head full of dark brown hair, and none of them seemed to be balding.
She couldn’t imagine that Princess Aqua’s hair could be of any use to her.

“Who are you!”

The first one to come back to their senses was the boy, who was closest to Izumi. Probably two or three years younger than even Prince Hinoki of I’Jibro.

His eyebrows and eyes slanted upwards, and gave him a very strong-willed and sharp impression.

“Answer!”

No sooner had he stood up, did he draw the dagger at his waist to point straight at her.

“That’s a terribly difficult question for me to answer, but… If I said that I was called an angel yesterday, would that help? Do you know what an angel is?”

Izumi tilted her head in wonder.

Would a mystic have been better?

Their appearances were quite different to those of Jebas. Their clothing, their faces, everything was closer to the people of Yohk'Zai.
Behind the boy, the two women gasped.

"Angel-sama!? Roten! Sheathe your sword!"

The younger girl ran over and hugged Roten from behind.

"Sister! Please let go of me. There's no proof that this thing is an angel. She might be a spy from I'Jibro!"

"I'Jibro!?" cried Izumi in shock.

Apparently Queen Akka had all sorts of enemies. Considering that she was the type who could lock Prince Hinoki in the tower, Izumi wasn't surprised that she had incurred the wrath of others.

"I'm not an I'Jibro spy. Well, I'll still be troubled if you ask for proof, though. Can't you just believe me?"

"Who would!"

Roten glared at Izumi with sword in hand. But the young girl――apparently his older sister――frantically stopped him.

"Sheathe your blade, Roten! Even if it's the power of I'Jibro, how could a single spy make it into our village?"

Apparently her calm but stern voice was not reaching him.
As if to show that his sister could not stop him, he stepped forward anyway, and raised his sword.

"Greedy thing of I'Jibro, I shall punish you in place of the heavens! You can redeem yourself in the afterlife, you breast-flashing Woman!"

"HAH!?"

At first Izumi had felt sorry for him, sure that he had been wronged by Queen Akka… But his next words caused anger to shoot through her eyes. She wasn't naked because she wanted to be.

"Who are you calling a breast-flashing woman!"

Taking a firm stance in the bathtub, she pointed vigorously at Roten.

"Have a good look! Just how am I flashing anything!!"

And right after she said that, Izumi regained her sanity.
She was acting exactly like a pervert.

"Um——"

Ignore what happened just now. She was so embarrassed that she wanted to dissolve into the water, but when she forced back the embarrassment and wanted to say that, the boy cut off her words.

"You are most certainly flashing them. So what dissatisfaction could you have when I call you a flasher."

Izumi was dumbfounded.
Was he just too young to feel embarrassed about a woman's naked body? Could it be that he always got in the bath with the sister that was hugging him right now, and that's why he was used to women?

"No, umm…"

Drained, Izumi placed her hand against the windowsill.

Oh, that's right.

Izumi looked behind her.
She wasn't sure *how* it was going to be useful, but it would definitely save them from their predicament.

Let's just hand it over already, so I can enjoy my bath.

Izumi reached for the garbage bag, and then handed it through the window.

“You can have this.”

She undid the knot, leant through the window, and then placed it onto the floor. From the open mouth of the bag spilt the sleek silver hair.

“This is…”

Roten muttered with sword still brandished.

“…The hair of Kon York the Second’s.”

His sister finished his words.

Izumi tilted her head in wonder. Conyork the Second. She was sure she had heard the name before.

“The fraud who travelled the world, Conyork the Second!”

She immediately remembered, and struck her hand in realisation.
The Old Maestro had told Aqua’s brother about him.
Apparently he really *did* travel the world.

“Are you really an angel?”

Perhaps because she was holding the silver hair, and seemed to know of Conyork the Second, Roten looked at her questioningly.

“Y-, Yes. That’s right.”

If she told him no, she would end up as “Breast-flashing Woman” again.
Izumi threw out her chest, and nodded.

“Nobody in the Heavens possesses a dirty heart. That’s why everybody is naked there.”

Unable to fully swallow it, Roten furrowed his brows, but at least he seemed to have calmed down for now. After lowering his sword, he turned

around and said,

“Sister, please let go of me.”

Having made sure that her brother had calmed down, Roten’s sister immediately kneeled and lowered her head.

“O Angel. By bringing the hair of Kon York the Second, does that mean that you acknowledge me as Chief?”

Izumi had absolutely no idea. While Izumi was bewildered, Roten cut in front of his sister.

“Angel. Please give that hair to me! My sister, Yuataree fell ill the other day, and lost the power to hear the voices of the insects. It would be impossible for her to complete the inauguration ceremony. She will simply become food for the insects!”

“No, please make *me* Chief. Roten is still young, and cannot use the flute well. It is when you cannot convey your heart to the insects that you will truly become their food. Please, make me Chief.”

“Right now she can’t even bring back Kon York the Second’s hair! It’s impossible for her to become Chief!”

“I failed because Kon York the Second’s hair is enshrined deep in a valley with many nests. For the ceremony, I only need one nest to obey. It is more important to convey your voice, than to hear theirs. It is still impossible for Roten.”

Izumi became more and more lost.
The two of them kept taking turns in trying to convince her, so she asked them to wait.

“C-, Calm down, you two. Could you first explain from the beginning why you’re arguing about becoming Chief?”

It didn’t seem that they were trying to steal the position out of greed. Instead, it felt like they were doing it because they cared for the other.

That's why she calmed them down and asked them what was going on.

"Explain…? All you need to do is name me Chief!"

"Roten! This won't do. In the future, you're going to be supporting Ottko Yu."

"Yuataree. Roten. Please stop this. You're troubling the angel."

The reclined middle aged woman had noticed that Izumi couldn't stop them at all, so she spoke up. Izumi turned to look at the woman she had forgotten about.
Her face was completely pale, and it was obvious that she was unwell. She rose with heavy movements.

"Mother! You musn't! If you don't lay down-!"

"Exactly, Mother!"

"Quiet."

The woman who seemed to be their mother, held them back firmly, and then lowered her head.

"O Angel. I apologise for the rudeness of my children. But their impoliteness comes from their care for each other. I implore that you show them mercy."

The woman's formal attitude caused Izumi to flap her hand in panic.

"No, nono, I never thought of them as rude or impolite at all."

Except for the Breast-Flashing Woman comment.

The woman smiled in relief.

"Thank you very much."

Then, once again, she bowed deeply.

“I understand why you graced us with your presence with that hair in your possession. It was because you sensed that we were in a crisis. Please, grant power to us, the citizens of Ottko Yu.”

“Eh!? Ummm…”

There were tears in the woman’s eyes.

“So what Kon York the Second taught us was true. If you continue to bear a righteous heart, salvation will come for you.”

Izumi could feel a cold sweat on her back.
If after all this time, she said “Actually, you’re wrong…”

“Then, I’ll do whatever I can.”

——*What exactly can I even do!?*

Screamed Izumi, in her heart.
She had already handed over the hair. What else could she do?
Izumi was regretting her thoughtlessness, but it wasn’t time to be regretting.

“For now, please lay down. And please tell me what’s going on. With as much detail as possible, and from the very beginning.”

But first of all, the sick woman needed to lay down.

“Yes——”

The woman bowed for the third time.

“Chief! A messenger from I’Jibro has come.”

Suddenly, they all heard a voice. And seemingly chasing that clearly anxious voice, were audible footseps.
Tension ran through the expressions of the trio.
Faster than Roten could run off, Yuataree moved into action.

“There’s no time. Angel, please take care of Roten. Please shelter him until the inauguration ceremony is complete.”

No sooner had she said that did Yuataree pick up Roten.
Even if he was a child, it should have been hard for her to hold him up to the high window.
But Yuataree did so easily. Perhaps it was like the strength of a mother, lifting a car from her child.

“S-, Sister!”

Roten struggled violently.
Almost at the very moment that a man opened the door, Yuataree pushed Roten at Izumi, and then shut the window.

TL: Sister, Mother, should be ‘esteemed sister’ and ‘esteemed mother’, but it feels too distant for this particular context.

Chapter 16

A mysterious pane moved and cut off Yuataree's form.

Her heartbroken gaze beheld Roten, until she disappeared beyond the pane with a click.

"…Sister."

A weak mutter escaped his lips.
She was no longer anywhere to be seen. The panel was thin, and tinged white, with delicate rises and falls. He didn't know how it worked, but like staring into deep water, no matter how he stranged his eyes, he couldn't see a person.

Yuataree was long gone now.

Roten clenched his teeth. His eyes were wide, and his breath had stopped. The blood was rushing to his head, and his brow felt terribly painful. He knew that he was making a terrible expression. But Roten continued staring in the direction that Yuataree had once been.
It was because Yuataree had taught him that boys could never cry.
Even if he couldn't see his mother or sister ever again, Roten couldn't cry.

Yuataree had been a strict sister.
In place of their weak mother, who was busy with her duties as Chief, Yuataree had strictly disciplined Roten.
From teaching him his studies, to how to treat elders, to his duties as the son of the Chief. If he made even a little mistake, he would be hit without mercy. Just because he left a little *jiitake* left on his plate, he was forced to sit in front of the dinner table for two koku.

Even so, Roten loved his sister.
It was because he knew that Yuataree's strictness was built atop her love for him.
In order to teach him to read and write, she stayed up until dawn drawing pictures and words on cards. When he made a mistake in his courtesy, she would bow with him. Until he managed to swallow the *jiitake*, she would wait by him.
She was stricter than anybody, but kinder than anyone. To Roten, Yuataree was the best sister in the world.
And in order to protect him, that sister had recklessly attempted the ritual.
And it was all because he couldn't use the flute well.

"Sister."

This time, there was strength in his voice.
He had to do it in her place, no matter what. There was no time for him to pity himself.

"…This can't be."

He heard a voice from behind him.

"How long are you going to hold me!"

Suddenly, the white arms wrapped around his waist made him indescribably irritated. He struggled to escape her arms. The liquid below him splashed as he kicked, and suddenly, the woman tightened her grip in a panic.

"H-, Hey, don't struggle."

"Release me, Flasher Woman!"

"I told you I wasn't a flasher! Wai-, rather, calm down for a minute!"

"I am calm. Release me this instant, you insolent thing!"

"I-, Insolent…?"

The woman sounded bewildered. But her grip just grew stronger and stronger.

“I’m technically an angel, okay!? How am I insolent!”

By now, even Roten knew that this woman was no spy.
It was *because* he considered that she might really be an angel that he endured elbowing her in the gut, or headbutting her in the ear. Amongst the things that Yuataree taught him as the son of the Chief, was self defence. Breaking free from a frail woman’s grip was no trouble for him.

“I’ll let go, but you have to promise me one thing.”

“I’ll do whatever you want, so spit it out already.”

He obeyed her because he wanted her to let go this instant.

“Look over there.”

The woman turned, with Roten still in her arms. It was a white plank, not unlike that which separated Roten from his sister. This one ran vertically, and was quite large.

“You absolutely can’t open that door. Ah-, and this window is no good either. If you charge through while this window isn’t connected, I can’t even imagine what might happen…”

That was two things.
Roten looked around, peeved.
He was inside of a small room.
And the things inside of this almost irritating brightly coloured room were all things he had never seen before in his life.
A light pink tube, and then a slightly darker pink tube, as well as an elliptical prism with a hole right down the middle. Attached to the wall was a long, snake-like, shining rope, and at the end of it was a silver head, that hung above the two of them.
As Roten stared intensely at the insides of this room, suddenly, something occurred to him.

“Oi. If I can’t open these boards you call a window and door, then how am I supposed to get out of here. Don’t tell me that you intend to lock me up here forever.”

Indeed. In this room, there were only those two exits.
And unbelievably, when the woman heard his question, she let out a surprised, “Eh-” before falling silent.
Did she really intend to lock him up here?

“I need to take the ritual in place of Sister. I can’t keep your promise.”

——He didn’t care if she was an angel or not anymore. He was going to break out of here.
Roten prepared to move. Realising this, the woman called out in panic.

“Of course I’m not going to lock you up here. It’s okay, that window will connect you to the person you want to meet. So we can return to you to your sister. …Probably.”

“Probably?”

Her words had given him hope, but when he heard that last word, anxiety gushed up in him.

“No, uh, definitely! I’ll definitely return you to your sister, so first please tell me what’s going on. Inauguration rituals, and insects and stuff, I don’t understand what you’ve been talking about at all.”

It sounded a little bit like the woman was simply buying time, but if she was truly an angel, and this was truly the Heavens, then Roten had no means of returning to the mortal world. He reluctantly nodded.

“I get it. I’ll tell you everything… Angel. I will abide. I won’t open the planks without permission, and I will explain. So let me down already. I don’t know how it is in the Heavens, but in the mortal world we call it ‘lewdness’ when a naked woman embraces a man like this.”

“…A, man…? …But, well, I guess.”

Roten finally succeeded in escaping her arms.
As his feet touched down into the warm, bath-like liquid, relief came to Roten.

“It’s common sense in the Heavens to be naked, but I’ll conform with your mortal courtesies for a while. I’ll be back right away, just-, just wait there, okay? Okay? Don’t move, and don’t touch anything!”

“I got it,” nodded Roten, and the woman disappeared out of the room from the plank she called a door.

It opened and shut with a sound. But almost immediately afterwards, the woman reappeared with a white cloth wrapped around her body.

“…You’re misunderstanding the mortal world.”

With a single cloth that covered neither legs nor shoulders, what part of this was ‘conforming with mortal tendencies’?

“It can’t be helped, okay. My *bar’throwb* is still in the wash, and I was worried about taking my eyes off you. Anyway, forget about me. More importantly, explain. Why is it that you two didn’t want the other to become Chief? And what does it have to do with I’Jibro? Also, what relationship do you have with Conyork the Second?”

The woman fired one question after another.
Certainly, it was no time to be worrying about her misunderstanding. Roten opened his mouth to speak, but,

“Ah-, wait, yeah, hang on a moment.”

the woman immediately interrupted him.

“You’ll tire out if you keep standing. I’ll start feeling cold too. At least stick your feet in.”

With those words, the woman left the room again, and this time came back with a cloth in hand.

She placed one of them on the rim of the container that Roten was now standing in.

“You can sit on this. Aah, your cuffs are wet, aren’t they. It might not help much, but I’ll fold them for you.”

After Roten sat down as directed, she knelt down at his feet and began folding his pants.

“Oh? This clothing…”

The woman’s long hair was casually tied behind her head. When she tilted it, the stray hairs that weren’t tied in would tickle Roten’s knees.
Suddenly, Roten recalled something that happened as a child.
During the hot summers, Yuataree would often bring him to play in water as a break. When there wasn’t time to get naked and swim, she would always bend over in front of him to pull up his pant cuffs.
Under the sunlight, filtered through tree leaves, he would sit on a large boulder, while her hair fluttered in the wind. The water in the stream would sparkle brilliantly.
It was a precious memory, with his precious sister.
The woman in front of him doubled up with the image of his sister.

“…Sister.”

“Eh?”

The woman raised her head and tilted it, at his quiet mutter.

“I-, It’s fine! Sister always told me to do things myself! I’m not a little child.”

When he considered that the woman might have heard him calling for his sister, the embarrassment became unbearable.

“What are you talking about? You’re plenty little enough.”

The woman was taken aback for a moment, but then suddenly hung her head and clenched her teeth.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

Roten was sent into a panic when he saw the woman hold her stomach. Perhaps the air in the mortal air didn’t sit well with her body. Or could it be that his existence was contaminating the essence of this world? But despite his worries, what escaped the suffering woman’s lips was a laugh.

“Wha-, What are you laughing about!”

“I’…m sorry. You just remind me of a child I know, so I just.”

Roten clenched his fists and stood up. The humiliation made the blood rush to his head. But that was only for a moment.

“It’s shameful to let your emotions control you. Remember to control them.”

His sister had often told him this.

Since the woman kept saying “I’m sorry,” Rotan spat out “It’s fine,” in reply, and sat down with his head turned away.”

“I really am sorry. That one was my fault.”

The woman took a few breaths to stop her laughter, and then sat on the rim opposite Roten.

“So why do you two not want the other to become Chief? Is there something wrong with the inauguration ceremony?”

The woman was no longer smiling, nor stifling a smile. Now that she seemed seriously willing to listen, Roten changed his attitude too. Straightening his posture, he placed his hands on his knees. He was the next Ottko Yu Chief, and he needed to look the part. Calming his mind, he spoke as calmly and slowly as possible.

“The inauguration ceremony occurs when the position of Chief is passed on. The main meaning of the ceremony is to show to the king of I’Jibro that we have the power to make the insects obey us.”

“I’Jibro…”

“Right. To explain the ceremony, first I need to explain the history of the Ottko Yu tribe. We were originally a desert nomad tribe. Apparently we made our living by digging wells for other tribes. But because we didn’t have our own land, other tribes were harsh to us. Even though they asked us to dig up water for them, once we lost our use, their attitudes became cold. Perhaps they thought that we were aiming to steal their lands. Sick of that life, our ancestors sought a land of their own. With good timing, they met a king of I’Jibro. The king was interested in their ability to control the insects, and presented us with an offer for land in I’Jibro, in exchange for rescuing his mother from a tower. At the time, the one who negotiated with the king in our place was Kon York the Second. It wasn’t all he did for us, but I’ll leave that for now. Having gained a place to live from the king, our ancestors made a promise with the king. If the king of I’Jibro so wanted, we were to provide the power of the insects to help him. But at some point, the meaning of the promise changed, and if we ever lost the power to control the insects, we would need to return the land to the king.”

The further the story advanced, the wider her eyes became, and the more her mouth hung open.

“What’s wrong?”

Naturally he was left in wonder, but the woman just shook her head a little.

“I was just a little surprised. I’ve heard some of this story somewhere else, you see… But I see. So the boy who had his mother imprisoned ended up becoming the king.” muttered the woman, with her arms crossed. Before long, she looked up and him and asked,

“Meaning. Meaning that it’s time to pass on the position of Chief, and you need to show the King of I’Jibro your power.”

“That’s right. Normally the one who chooses the time is us. But demanded that we do so now… They completely forgot the meaning of the promise, and as time passed on, they became more and more greedy.”

Roten's gaze dropped to his knees.
His fists clenched unconsciously.
His arms trembled, and his fingernails dug into his skin.

"My mother can't stand up for long. Sister has only just lost her ability to hear the insects. And I… I can't convey my voice to the insects! Because of me, because of me, Sister…!"

"How… cruel…"

A hand with longer fingers covered his trembling fists.
At some point the woman had knelt down in front of him again.
Her hands were trembling too. Roten wondered if she was crying. But he was wrong. She was angry. Her eyebrows were raised dangerously, and she was looking at their hands.

"I've got it," said the woman, and she stared right at him. "So all I have to do is give you the power to talk to the insects, and your sister the power to hear the insects, right? Then I'll send you to your sister.

"When does the ceremony begin? Where's your sister now?"

"It starts in about two koku… Sister should be praying in front of the ritual nest right now."

"I see. Then we'll barge in! If the two of you aren't qualified to be Chief alone, then you can just do it together. Or is there some promise that it has to be done alone?"

Roten shook her head. She had a point. There was no reference to the number of Chiefs. It was obvious that there was one, after all.

"Then I'Jibro shouldn't be able to complain. As long as the insects listen, it should be fine even if there are two of you. Or rather, you can *prove* to them that it's fine! It's unforgivable to harass a child like this!"

Right now the woman seemed even angrier than Roten was.

“Leave it to me,” she said, as she held out her chest. Roten felt embarrassed for suspecting that she was a spy. This woman was undeniably an angel. He was certain that she would mediate for him, just like Kon York the Second once did.

“Then, Angel. Can that plank connect me to my sister?”

“Yes!”

The angel stood up with vigour, and placed her hand to her the ‘window’ plank. But she suddenly froze.

“What’s wrong? Won’t it open?”

“Eh? Ah, mn, it will, you know?”

There was definitely uneasiness in her voice. But now that he was distracted by the hope that she had given the Ottko Yu tribe, he didn’t think too much of it.
Perhaps it was too heavy for her to move. Thinking that, he placed his hand behind hers to help.

“Ah-, wait!”

The plank moved much more easily than expected.
Almost like fog clearing up, the white-tinged plank disappeared.
Roten thought that he was about to save his sister and the Ottko Yu tribe.
But what met his eyes left him shocked. Far from his sister, he was looking at some place he’d never even see before.

“Where… is this?”

A flat expanse of green. A damp wind brushed his cheek, followed by the sounds of leaves rustling in the wind. It was one large tree, surrounded by a sea of green grass.

“H-, Huh? This place isn’t… the ceremony place… huh…”

Roten looked up at the woman standing next to him. The image of the woman's dumbstruck expression entered his eyes.
Rage bubbled up from deep inside. What "Leave it to me!".
The fact that he believed in her once just made him all the more angry.

"You damned liar! You really are just a breast-flashing woman!"

"EEH!? You're *that* disappointed in me? But, I mean, I do feel bad but… this alone I can't… Anyway, shall we close the window and try again?"

It was when the woman feebly tried to close the window that it happened.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh! Stay awayy! Please stay awayy!"

A somewhat shrill, yet somewhat deep, voice. But definitely a woman's.
And at the same time, a familiar GICHICHICHI sound.

"I'm all skin and boness! I'm not tasty at alll!"

While Roten was too dumbfounded to even scold the dumbfounded woman next to him, another woman jumped out before him. Without noticing them, she single-mindedly tried to climb the tree.

-GICHICHIGICHI-

When Roten saw what emerged to chase her, he screamed.

"Arrijighock!"

The arrijighock noisily clacked its jaws in threat, and placed a forelimb against the tree.
It couldn't climb it. But the woman was clumsy, and seemed like she would fall at any moment.
Roten fumbled with his shirt. There were *zaza* leaves inside his pocket, used for leaf whistles.
Taking one out, he placed it against his mouth.

-pyuuui pyu pyuui pyu pii-

The sound began clear, but immediately grew weaker.
Still, Roten continued to blow, and made the wind vibrate.

“Eh? That, eh? Wai-, eh? That’s a leaf whistle? Wait, you guys make insects listen to you, wha-, could it be that it’s one of the whistles!?”

Roten ignored the discomposed breast-flashing woman and desperately blew the flute.
But the arrijighock simply turned his way once, and wouldn’t part from the tree.

——Strange.

Even if he was terrible with the flute, never had an insect paid so little attention to its sounds.
Roten continued blowing, and listened carefully.

-GICHI GICHICHI GICHICHICHI-

“Please don’t come heree, I’m really not yummyy.”

The woman’s voice was getting in the way of the insect’s.
Roten had the best ear in the village. Even so, it was no easy task to understand the insects.
He grew irritated, and then shouted.

“Shut up! If you want to be saved, then shut up! Don’t make a sound.”

“Yessh! I’b sorrwy! …Wahhh, first id’s an insecd anbd now id’s a ghostdt? Plwease jusd cud mee a break alrweadyyy…”

The woman stiffened with a start, and began apologising with mucus running down her face. After apparently finally noticing them, she looked their way, before almost bursting into tears again.

“I told you to shut up. Shut your mouth right now!”

Perhaps overwhelmed by his threatening look, the woman nodded without a word.

The noise was finally gone. Roten desperately strained his ears.

-GICHICHICHIGICHICHI GICHICHICHI-

He looked up with a gasp.
The arrijighock kept mentioning something over and over again. That was ‘starvation’. The starving arrijighock stubbornly pursued the woman. He immediately realised why.

“You there! You have a *sunarabi* don’t you! Throw it away, now!”

“Zu-, Zunarabi?”

“A four-legged animal with long ears. You have one, don’t you?”

“Ah-” muttered the woman in realisation. Apparently she knew what he was talking about.

“Throw it away now! The arrijighock is going after it!”

The dim-witted woman had finally found a foothold. Placing a foot on a branch, with one hand she hastily unfastened the bag on her back.
Roten began to undo his clothing as he watched.

“Eh? What are you doing?”

The breast-flashing woman was hysteric when she saw him strip, but he ignored her. After he finished, he soaked them in the liquid at his feet.
Suddenly, a strong smell filled the small room.

——*This should be good enough.*

Roten looked up at the same time the dim woman threw the sack on her back.

“Y-You dumbass!”

His eyes widened.
Of all things, she threw it towards him.

But luckily, the bag opened in the air, and the wet *sunarabi* landed on the floor.
The arrijighock immediately ran to capture it.
The bag approached his head. He tilted to avoid it, and then bundled up his wet clothing.
He heard the bag land behind him.

“Uwah-, what is this. It stinks of alcohol.”

“Tsk.”

Roten clicked his tongue. Apparently there was still a *sunarabi* in there.

“Oi! Woman! Take this!”

He tossed his balled clothing at the dim woman. She almost fell over, but she caught it.”

“There are hahanero leaves weaved into those. Rub it all over you so the scent sticks in. Wait until the sun sets, and then wrap those around your legs. Try and get as far away from here as possible!”

“Yhess-! …B-, Butd why?”

The arrijighock turned their way with the *sunarabi* in its mouth.
It began approaching at terrifying speeds, attracted by the scent of the remaining *sunarabi*.
There was no time left to throw it back.

“I’m closing this!”

He shouted, as he closed the window.

Chapter 17

The stench of alcohol filled the room.
Izumi glanced at the bag behind her. Long ears, stained with red liquid, were peeping out of the bag.
It was unmistakably the source of the smell.
Not only that, the more she got used to the smell, the more bloody it seemed to smell.
Just how on earth would one describe this unique stench?
Perhaps if you dove into a dumpster with your heavy drinking friend.

Oh? Speaking of which, they still haven't paid me back for last week at the bar…

Thought Izumi, as she tried to escape reality. Unfortunately, the small hand gripping her arm wouldn't let her.

When she turned around, she found Roten's sharp glare.
His anger was completely justified. Izumi knelt to his eye-level, and then lowered her head.

"I'm sorry! It's always gone pretty well, so I thought it would this time too, but…"

She started with an energetic apology, but her voice grew smaller as time went on.
Thinking about it, perhaps she had gotten carried away.
She had been completely convinced that the window would connect her to where she wanted, and that she would definitely be of use to them.
Now that she was calm, she realised that it had also connected to people she didn't want to meet.

As she reflected, Izumi looked at Roten.
Even if their appearances were different, he reminded her of the boy trapped in the tower.
Prince Hinoki who wanted to quickly become an adult.
Izumi had felt anger at Queen Akka ever since.
And when she considered that Roten was being tormented by that same queen, the rage caused the blood to rush to her head.

Perhaps she shouldn't have carelessly promised.

Even so.

All she could do was hope that the window would connect to the right person.
In that case, there was only one thing to do.
She took Roten's hand as he trembled in anger. He tried to shake her off, but she squeezed tightly.

"I really am sorry. Before the ritual begins, there's two koku left, right?"

Izumi looked at the control panel in the way. The illuminated top half showed the numbers of a clock. It would start an hour from now.

Calm down. It's okay, there's still time.

Telling herself this, she stared into Roten's eyes.

"Before the ritual begins, I'll get the window to connect somehow."

Even if she shouldn't have made promises she couldn't be certain she could keep, what would happen if she told him the truth?
The boy desperately holding his tears would become anxious.

"I'll make it connect, so just believe me and wait. Please."

Blood oozed from his lips as he bit them.
Roten glared at Izumi with anger in his eyes.

“One koku. If in one koku you haven’t managed to do it, I’ll jump out myself!”

Izumi wanted to shriek.
It caused her to imagine something from a gore film, and the blood left her face.
Izumi nodded like a bobblehead.

“I-I got it. I got it, so don’t be hasty.”

Roten didn’t reply. In exchange, he stared at her with bloodshot, and teary eyes.
His eyes seemed to tell her to hurry, yet at the same time, told her that he believed in her.
Under his gaze, she stood in front of the window.
She took a deep breath, and then slowly exhaled.

——*Please!*
——*Please connect to Roten’s sister! Yua… Yua… What was it again?*

Izumi turned fearfully back to Roten.

“Umm, what was, your sister’s name again…?”

His temples twitched.

“Yua! I remember the Yua! It’s a name that we don’t have in the Heavens, so it was a little hard to remember, hahaha…”

Had she ever been so terrified of a primary schooler before?
Roten stared at her with a look that could kill, before silently sitting down on the rim of the bathtub and crossing his arms. His hands gripped his arms, as though he was struggling not to strangle her.

“It’s Yuataree,” he whispered.

Izumi went over the name again and again in her head.
Even if she forgot her own phone number, she would definitely remember this name.

Time to start again.
Izumi placed her hand against the window, and then took a deep breath.

“Connect me to Yuataree! If you don’t, I’ll turn you into fixed window!” she shouted in anger, before opening the window with a bang.

The scenery changed.
Hot, dry air, wafted into the bathroom.
A vast desert expanse lay before her eyes.

A desert?

She wondered, but when she looked to her left and right, she found boulders strewn about.
No, not just there. There were boulders far into the distance, as well as right beneath her window.
A large desert clearing was surrounded by boulders.
Far into the distance, just across from where Izumi was, stood a large tent atop a giant boulder.
Beneath the tent, and immediately around it, Izumi could see people standing about. It was too far, and she couldn’t see the faces, but all of them wore the same blue clothes.

“Which one is Sister? Where is Sister!?”

She didn’t know when he approached, but Roten screamed with a trembling voice as he scanned the surroundings.
Before Izumi could call out to him, they heard a confused voice.

“That voice… it can’t be, Roten?”

The voice came from close by. Shockingly close by. Izumi almost fell over in surprise.
When Izumi leant out of the window just a little, she immediately came face to face with a woman who looked right back at her.
She looked a lot like Roten. It was definitely Yuataree. She had been right next to the window.
She was kneeling on top of a carpet, itself on top of a boulder.

“I did it…”

It felt like Izumi would collapse from the relief.

“Angel!? Roten!?”

Yuataree’s eyes visibly widened in shock.

“Sister.”

“Why did you come!”

Roten’s voice was relieved, but Yuataree’s rebuke cut him off.

“…The insects are stirring.”

“Eh?”

Izumi tilted her head.
She couldn’t see insects anywhere. It was just sand and boulders, as far as the eye could see. Not only that, she couldn’t hear the cacophony that the insects made, like rough metal on metal.
But Roten looked at the sandy clearing with a serious expression.
When she happened to look at Yuataree, she found her watching the sand with a sad expression.”

“You can hear it, can’t you, Roten. I can’t anymore…”

Yuataree seemed to scan the sand, as though looking for what she had lost.
But eventually she gave a small shake of her head.
Yuataree gently placed her palm on the hand Roten held against the windowframe.

“It’s fine. I already know that these insects haven’t been calm these last few days.”

“…Last few days? Why haven’t I heard of this!”

“I received a report from the nest guards that they’ve been repeatedly whispering something too quietly to hear.”

“Please, Sister, you must leave this to me!”

No sooner had he said this, did Roten try to leave the bathroom.

“I will not!” she roared.

She stood there firmly with her back straightened, and looked down at Roten.
Izumi and Roten looked up at her and shuddered.
Her caring expression was nowhere to be seen, and her gaze was now sagacious and dignified.
It caused one to lose their breath.
——Even though she wasn’t too different from Izumi in age, where was this force coming from?
It surely came from the difference in pressure they had, growing up.
Had Izumi been acting incredibly presumptuously?
As these thoughts rose up in her, Izumi quietly dropped her gaze.

“But, Sister, you can no longer…”

But next to her, Roten had not yet given up.
Izumi looked at him in shock. Even if it was his sister, he really had guts to talk back, the way Yuataree was now. Izumi could only silently cheer for him.

“I can no longer what?”

Yuataree’s tone was cold.

“Do you wish to say that I am unqualified for Chief because I can no longer hear their voices?”

“That’s…”

“Listen well, Roten. I will be the next Chief. Just because I can’t hear their voices, you think that over twenty years of training for the position could

possibly lose to a child who can't play the leaf whistle at nine?"

Roten's face quickly turned dumbfounded.
Izumi watched over them in suspense.
Yuataree was being firm. Roten wordlessly looked up at her. He looked like he would cry at any moment.

Suddenly, Yuataree laughed. It was mocking.

"Roten, do you not believe in your sister?"

He tightened his grip on the window frame, but didn't reply.
If he admitted it, it would harm her pride, but if he refused, he would be sending her to her death.

"Don't be so arrogant just because your ears are a little good."

How painful was it for her to mock her brother like this?
Because Izumi knew, she could only hold her tongue.
Silence fell.

But soon after, she heard a piercing, metallic noise. It came from the tent.
Looking its way, she found a large gong.

"It can't be! There should still be time!"

Roten's words told Izumi that it was the signal to begin the ceremony.

"It seems like the new king is not only greedy, but capricious. This is an unforgivable slight. …But we can only obey. We have the power to control the insects, but not enough to make them our enemy."

Yuataree gave one glance at the tent, before turning her gaze to Izumi. She bowed without a word.

She didn't speak, but Izumi knew what she was saying.

"Please take care of my brother."

“Wai-”

Wait. Izumi swallowed her words.
Even if she told her to wait, was there anything Izumi could do?
Even Izumi tried to negotiate, apparently the people from I’Jibro were in that faraway tent, and to begin with, Izumi had no cards to play against this capricious queen. It was something obvious after just a little thought, but Izumi hadn’t realised it until now. She really had overestimated herself. She had thoughtlessly assumed that as long as the window connected, she could do anything.

Looking not at Roten, nor the depressed Izumi, Yuataree descended from the boulder.
There were hollows that you couldn’t even call primitive steps, but Yuataree swiftly descended them, and reached the bottom boulder.
There wasn’t even thirty centimetres distance to the sand. An arrijighock could just jump and capture her in an instant.

Yuataree placed the green leaf to her mouth.

-pyuuuuuuuuuuuuuui pyuuuuuuuuuuuui-

A long, comfortable sound.
The moment she played this, three black lumps appeared from inside the sand.
Each one showed only the top part of its body, and ran circles in front of Yuataree.
To Izumi, they seemed like the dorsal fins of hunting sharks in the ocean.

“Hey, what do you need to do for the ceremony?”

With her eyes still on Yuataree, Izumi questioned the stock-still Roten.”

“The ceremony…”

Izumi hadn’t expected a reply, but it came surprisingly readily.

“The ceremony is called the I’Nabano Shiloh’la, and involves controlling the insects with the whistle, and getting on its back. While on its back, the candidate needs to walk on their backs, all the way to the other shore to be acknowledged as chief.”

“That’s so reckless!”

Izumi could only call it an act of suicide to use such a ferocious insects as a bridge.

-pyuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuui-

The sound of the whistle was loud.
But the insects continued to circle in the sand, and showed no signs of letting her on.

“Hey, do you think it’s possible like this?”

“How could it be! Sister’s playing is perfect, but they aren’t listening at all.”

“Why!?”

“I don’t know!” he screamed.

Izumi looked at him again.
He was trembling.
His face was pale blue, and he looked like he was about to collapse.
Like this, his heart would break if he saw his sister attacked by the insects.

“Roten.”

Izumi wrapped her arms around his trembling shoulders.

“It might be unfair to say this to you, but get it together. You heard the insects earlier, didn’t you? Then listen again. Listen to what the insects are saying!”

Roten shook his head.

“I can’t. The sound of the sand is getting in the way, and I can barely hear a thing. And if I help her, Sister will lose confidence in her abilities as Chief. She wouldn’t forgive me!”

Her earlier rejection seemed to have quite an effect. He had lost all his willpower.
When Izumi saw his hollow eyes, she grew irritated and shook his shoulders.

“Stop making excuses! You can believe in her if you want! But I can’t! I only just met her. How could I believe her. Listen. I’m the angel that gave you Conyork the Second’s hair. You’ll trouble me too if she dies here and wastes all my work! Children don’t need to overthink things. Don’t think, and just listen to the voices of the insects!”

“The voices… of the insects?”

“That’s right! Your sister believes in your ears too, doesn’t she?”

The will to do things, returned to his eyes. Seeing this, Izumi slowly told him what to do.

“Now then, Roten. Listen carefully.”

Guided by her voice, Roten closed his eyes.

-pyuuuuuuuuuui-

The sound of Yuataree’s whistle.
The sound of blowing wind, and arrijighock, pushing through the sand.
That was all Izumi could heard.
But Roten furrowed his brows, and began moving his lips.

“We can not stay… here… it is not… here.”

“What? What isn’t?”

“Shut up, I can’t hear them.”

His rude and conceited tone came back to him. Izumi sighed in relief. It was weird when he wasn't like this.

"Not here… Not here… It isn't here… Let's chase it."

Like I asked, what *isn't here!?*

The more she had to stay silent, the more she screamed in her mind.

-pyuuuuuuuuuuuuui pyuuuuuuuuuuuuui pyuuuuuuuuuuuuui-

The sound of the flutes continued incessantly. Even Izumi who couldn't understand it, could hear the anxiety and impatience.

Hurry, hurry!

Just as Izumi prayed, Roten's eyes shot open.

"I've got it!"

"What!?"

"The sunarabi! The arrijighock are looking for sunarabi!"

"Sunarabi… Huh?"

She looked over to the shower to find the bag from the earlier woman. By now, far from just the ears, the whole bag was soaked red.

"Are the insects here hungry? But there are three of them. We only have enough for one."

I wonder if it tastes like rabbit.

While thinking about stupid things, Izumi came up with an idea.
Even if one sunarabi wasn't enough to satisfy them, perhaps one sunarabi was enough to fool them.

"As long as she reaches the other side, she'll be Chief, right?"

Izumi reached for the bag. She was hesistant to touch something so bloody, but she steeled hersef, and grabbed it with vigour.
Ignoring the disgusting, sticky sensation, Izumi held it up.
After feeling its weight, Izumi nodded. With her strength, it would be more than enough to throw this down to Yuatareе.

“I’m going to throw this down to her.”

“Eh?” shouted Roten.

“Yuatareе! The insects are hungry! I’m going to throw you the sunarabi, so hold it up to them, and tell them this!

‘If you carry me to the other shore, I’ll give you as many sunarabi as you want’

After you get there, don’t say anything unecessary, and just climb a rock!”

Yuatareе looked up at her in surprise, but she immediately nodded and blew.

-pyuuuuuuuuipyuuuuuuuui-

Izumi waited for her to stop blowing the whistle, and then throw the bag. When Yuatareе caught the bag, she pulled out the sunarabi from inside, and holding it by the ears, she held it up to show the arrijighock.

-pyuuuuuuuuipyuuuui-

And what happened when she did? The arrijighock lined up before her.

“It worked! It really worked!” cheered Izumi, when she saw Yuatareе step on their backs.

After Yuatareе blew her whistle again, the arrijighock began to quickly move, each one circling around to the front of the queue each time she finished walking on one.
Without stumbling once, Yuatareе walked all the way to the other shore. After rushing up a boulder, she threw the sunarabi at the three insects.

-pyuuuuui pyuuuuui-

Izumi had no idea what she was saying. But they jumped around the sunarabi for a but, before happily disappearing into the sand again.
When they disappeared from the clearing, the sound of a gong resounded.
The ritual was a success.

“Thank goodness. Sister…”

Just as Roten muttered that, some uproar occurred.
Izumi could see the people moving about beneath the tent. Somebody handed a long pole-like thing to the person in the middle of the tent.

The formalities to complete the ceremony?

Just as she thought in wonder, an arm stretched out before her.
After it grabbed the window frame, the owner of the arm brought his small body above the window. It was Roten.
With his feet still on the windowframe, he glared towards the tent, before turning to Izumi.

“I’m going. Angel… Umm, you’ve really helped me,” he said bashfully, and was met with Izumi’s smile.

“Stay healthy,” she said. “Tell the new Chief hello. And also, your sister… is a terribly wonderful sister.”

His discouraged face spread into a smile.
It was the first time she had seen him do so.

“Of course she is.”

With those words, Roten leapt out the window, and ran at full speed to Yuataree.

Izumi watched him leave with warm feelings, but she suddenly felt a disturbance in the force, and looked forward.
Beneath the tent, a person entered her sight.
She couldn’t see their face. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that they

were looking at her.
That person rose the stick that they had received earlier.

What are they going to do?

Just as she strained her eyes, something roared through the wind.
A gale flashed past her face.
A hard sound rang out behind her, like stone being destroyed, and after that was the sound of a light object bouncing on the floor.

“Idiot! Close the plank!”

“Eh-?”

While Izumi was stunned and confused, Roten who had returned without her knowing appeared right before her, and slammed the window with enough power to rattle it.

Calm returned to the bathroom.
The steam that had collected on the ceiling cooled, and then dripped into her bathtub.
The sound of the bouncing finally stopped, and when Izumi turned around, she shrieked.

“Eh-? Eh-? EEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?”

There was a small hole in the wall now.
Not only that, right next to the blood puddle, lay a single arrow.

Could it be that I almost died?

Or so she thought, her face turning white as a sheet, but she immediately realised that she was wrong.

There was a folded piece of paper tied to it.

Izumi fearfully picked it up, and then unfasted the paper. After unfolded the rough, thick paper, its contents gave Izumi a shock.

“I can’t read it…”

Izumi’s mutter resounded sadly through the bathroom.

TL:

“I wonder if it tastes like rabbit.”

Japanese have counters. It’s like how you say ‘three ears of corn’. Here, ‘three’ is the counter. In Japanese, there’s a counter called ‘wa’. It’s for birds. So three birds is called, ‘three wa of birds’.

Oh, but also rabbits. Birds and rabbits. Why are rabbits treated as birds? According to urban myth, the buddhist priests of ancient Japan were not allowed to eat many types of meats, but birds were except.

But rabbits were just so delicious that they claimed that the ears were actually wings, and thus rabbits were birds, and okay to eat.

Well, that’s just how the legend goes. There’s probably some much more boring historical reason for this.

At any rate, sunarabi probably comes from ‘suna(sand)’ and ‘rabbit(English word)’. So presumably it looks a lot like a rabbit, despite the few descriptions in the novel.

When Izumi thinks, “I wonder if it tastes like rabbit”, in the original text, she’s wondering, “I wonder if I count this with ‘wa’.”

Chapter 18

Mira was born in a peaceful village.

Situated far from the Capital, the soil was fertile, and its seasons were beautiful.
If you headed to the eastern tip of the Kingdom of Insen, you would find some mountains, and upon crossing them you would arrive in the land of sand.
Not only was it situated in a basin formed by those mountains, its summerr were sultry, its winters freezing, but it was troubled by neither flooding nor snow.

Almost all of the villagers made a livelihood of growing *zhaltkane*. It was by no means an easy lifestyle. Come harvest, things became so busy that you would even want the help of a *khat*. Even so, the time they spent here was relaxed, and warm.

The price of *zhaltkane* had long been stable. Even if they couldn't live in luxury, it was possible to live on *zhaltkane* without lacking food nor clothing. Perhaps that was why the villagers were all so gentle and carefree.

Mira had a thought. If she had been born somewhere else, she would surely have suffered in life.
Mira was thankful for her family. She was thankful to all the villagers. And she was thankful to the *zhaltkane* too.
The steady lifestyle gave the villagers peace of mind, and it gave birth to a place accepting enough to even accept a person like her.

Mira was aware that she was an oddball.
Since infancy, Mira had always seemed to have a few screws loose. She would always be staring blankly into the sky, and even when you called out

to her, she wouldn't reply. She would also have trouble staying in one place, and would often disappear before anybody noticed. And finally, she would always be discovered in outrageous places.
It was not just the one time that the villagers had to search for her. Even so, none of them rejected her, and they simply watched over her kindly.
Everyone had seen her as a child that they needed to protect.
And when she turned eight, her assessment suddenly changed.
The reason she stared blankly into the sky was because she was finding questions from across the world, and thinking about their answers. The reason she would never reply was because the questions demanded her undivided attention, and she never realised you were talking to her to begin with. The reason she would never stay in one place was because once she found her interest in something, she would lose sight of everything else.

The teacher who realised her talent was also an oddball. Although he had graduated from an elite university in the Capital, he turned his back on the path of becoming an official, and instead taught a school in the backwater village that Mira lived in.

Once, Mira had asked him why he came to her village.
He gave a somewhat self-mocking smile, and muttered,

"Because I discovered that I was a *ribitt* in a well. I ran away.

"But you…" said the teacher, as he placed his hand on Mira's head.

Not long afterwards, he counselled her parents to let her attend school in the Capital.
At first, they doubted his words, when he claimed that their daughter was an undeniable genius.
But after they saw Mira distinguish herself under his teachings, they began to seriously consider it.

However, Mira herself refused.

Growing *zhaltkane* granted a steady lifestyle. But to support a child living in the capital on it was uneasy.
Not only that, Mira was female. Even if she became an excellent student

with fantastic grades, far from becoming a high official, it was doubtful as to whether she could even enter university.
There was no point to forcing a burden onto her parents and two brothers if she couldn't pay them back.
The teacher mourned her talent, but Mira had no regrets.
Mira knew that there were plenty of things to learn, even without going to a fancy university in the Capital.
The flowers in the fields, the insects that crawled the earth, the moon and stars as they glittered in the night sky; questions about the world were endless, and she would never be lacking in things to ponder. To Mira, everything around her was a teacher as well.

And so, Mira's worth had completely changed after the teacher had moved into the village.

Until eight, she had been worried about as an absent-minded child, but after that she was praised as a prodigy.
And now, when she was twenty, her worth changed once again.

——The difference between a genius and an idiot is paper thin.

Sometimes in disbelief, and sometimes in knowing jest, this line had become used to describe her.

Even though she was older now, neither her occasional absentmindedness, nor her habit of disappearing had been fixed at all. She was painfully aware that it was a problem.
Mira knew best that this new assessment fit her perfectly.

And now, considering the situation she currently found herself in…

"…I might really be an idiot,"

she muttered, as she gave a huge sigh.

Why had things come to this…?

It all began with a lake on the edge of the village. She had set out to observe the eggs of an insect that made their nests in *asch* leaves, found on lake shores. It was then that she had noticed the change.

Even though it hadn't been raining, the water level had increased.
At this point, she should have run back to the village and discussed it with the villagers and her teacher.
The lakewater was used for irrigation as well as paddies. A change to the lake was a serious matter for the village.

But Mira's bad habit reared its head.

With a new question in her mind, everything else was pushed out.
It was as though all sound from her surroundings disappeared, and her vision narrowed until she could only see one thing.
All she knew was that it had to do with the lake.
Mira walked the circumference of the lake, and noticed that one of the streams feeding into it had deepened. And so, she began to walk and follow it upstream.

She continued to observe as she walked, careful of the terrain beneath her feet. When night fell, she would set up a bonfire and rest, and when day broke, she would resume her walking.
Mira continued to walk, as she gave thanks to her mother, who had prepared food and a flint because of her habit of becoming a vagrant, and finally, she reached what she believed to be the source.

She was in a forest now.
A common, *zuki* forest that the villagers would often come to for lumber.
But there was a clear change. The ground was muddy for a large area around the forest.
The river continued beyond the river, but the muddiness stopped here. It was likely that this place was the cause then.

With a tree branch, Mira dug the ground here and there. Just digging a little was enough to find water.

Zuki trees preferred a drier environment. Finding this much water here would meant that even the healthiest trees here would one day rot and die.

As for the cause, first, Mira considered changes in the climate, causing a mountain peak somewhere to thaw and flood the place.
But how strange then, that only this place was wet.

In that case, the next idea she came up with was a change in the currents of the water table.
Considering how more water gushed out the further down she dug, this seemed to be correct.

At the moment, the increase in water volume was just enough to cover the forest. But if this continued to grow, or perhaps the subterranean water currents changed again, then the *zhaltkane* would no doubt be affected as well.

This time, the thought of going back to the village occurred to her.
She walked around the quagmire, measuring its scope, as well as the water level on wet trees.

Then, just as she thought to return, and was wiping her muddy hands on her clothing, it happened.
Two never-before-seen, small, long-eared animals appeared in front of her.
The animal jumped out from a hole about the size of two cupped hands, and then began scratching the base of its ear with its forelegs.
Its eyes were round, and under the mud, there was white fur. After shaking off the mud from its body, it noticed Mira, and then bounced off into the forest.

At that moment, the idea of returning to the village disappeared from her mind.

She chased after the light, hopping animals. She was out of breath, her legs were dirtied from splashing mud, but Mira paid no mind.

After a long, long chase, it suddenly ended.
It was when she left the forest, and had just reached a grass plain.

The animal let out a cry, and then suddenly, its long ears could no longer be spied peeping from out of the grass.
She ran to where it had been in a panic, and found that both animals were laying there, bleeding.

Wondering what on earth had happened, she looked around but only saw grass, blowing in the wind.
Although Mira felt that something was wrong, she grabbed the two animals, planning on bringing it back to study.

Thinking back, that had been a mistake.

Just as she registered two lustrous black poles, rising from the bloodied earth, those poles turned out to be a gargantuan insect that appeared before her.
Seeing it clack its horn-like, feeler-like organs together, Mira immediately placed the animals into her bag, and ran.
As she ran, she looked back to find that the insect had disappeared…
Instead, a swell in the ground seemed to follow her.
It was even more frightening than had the insect been chasing her in the open.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh! Stay awayy! Please stay awayy! I’m all skin and boness! I’m not tasty at alll!””

The massive insect answered her desperate plea by appearing from underground.
Mira clung to a lone tree in the plains, desperately trying to climb.
Tree climbing was not her strong point, but her desperation somehow got her up.
But she couldn’t relax. Although the insect’s six, bony legs didn’t seem suitable for climbing trees, if it did manage to climb it, it would be the end of the line for her.
Face soiled by mucous and tears, Mira prayed that it wouldn’t be able to reach her.
But Mira’s prayer would be answered in a mysterious way.

A boy, and then for some reason a half-naked woman. Two ghosts appeared to save her.
Ordered by the boy ghost, she tossed the long-eared beast——apparently called a sunarabi——away from herself.
The ghost duo immediately disappeared, but the insect——called an arrijighock by the ghosts——stayed put for a while, by the sunarabi blood.
Her hands, still trembling from terror, rubbed the ghost boy's wet clothing against her skin.
Only once she made sure that the sharp smell had transferred to her skin, could she finally feel a little relieved.

Just as the boy suggested, Mira forced her terror-stricken mind to work again, and realised that the arrijighock was staying away from the smell.
She then waited patiently.
The arrijighock wandered about regretfully by the bloodstains, before eventually disappearing into the earth.
Once the sun had fully set, she wrapped the ghost boy's clothes around her legs and climbed down from the tree.

Then, she ran.

She ran, and ran, and ran.
She had reluctantly left behind the bloodstained bag.
Thanks to that, the flint, the small leather cape soaked in oils to repel the rain, as well as her portable foods had come to nothing.
It was only when her knees shook, her legs felt weak, and she was sure that she couldn't run a step further did she find a boulder to crawl onto.
She wet her sore throat with her saliva, and then lay down on the rock.
Looking up at the star-filled sky, she finally calmed down.
There was a lot to think about. A change to underground water currents, sunarabi, and arrijighock. She had a lot of questions about the ghosts too, but considering that as well would have exceeded Mira's capacity.
She decided to forget about it for now.

Mira had only intended to use it to calm herself down, but as she traced each constellation, one by one, eventually she became absorbed in it.
After tracing over fifty constellations, her eyelids grew heavy.

Just before she drifted off, an urge that overpowered even sleepiness assaulted her.

——*My stomach… hurts…*

Was it because she had been exposed to too much fear, or was it because she had lay down on this cold boulder without wiping her sweat…
Prompted by the intense pain, Mira rolled off the boulder, dug a hole, and then crouching across it, she removed her clothing.
At some point, her sweat had run cold.

After making it just on time, and relieving herself of the pain, she looked around, and then blanched.
As for why, it was because the place was surrounded by nothing but *urcyn* trees, with their poisonous sap.

Had she not been obsessed with counting the stars, had she taken care of the cold, had she observed the surrounding vegetation, had she not chased after the sunarabi, and had she just simply headed straight back from the lake to begin with…

Regret tormented her endlessly.

With only one hope left, she checked her pockets. Inside her jacket, she found only a cylinder, hard to the touch, and was crestfallen. It was *zhaltkane*. Before going to the lake, she had gone to the fields to cut off a piece to see how well things were doing. Naturally, she couldn't use this to wipe herself.

Would she give up wiping, or would she deal with the rash?

Pitiably stuck between these two horrible choices, she gave a large sigh and muttered to herself.

I knew it…

"…I might really be an idiot."

"Eh? An idiot?"

Even though nobody should have answered, a confused voice reached her ears.

“That’s weird. I asked the window to connect me to somebody knowledgeable.”

The mutters came from the voice of a young woman.
Mira turned her head in confusion. There was still a long way from the village, and she remembered that there hadn’t even been a hut around here. This wasn’t a place for a woman to be wandering in the middle of the night.

“Well, whatever.”

Mira could hear the woman’s dumbfounded voice from the other side of the boulder.

“Ummmm, are you perhaps troubled? Or rather, where on earth are you?”

“I-, I’m here! I’m actually very troubled right now…!”

It was impossible for her *not* to be suspicious of a voice in the middle of nowhere. But you couldn’t escape an emergency without compromise, and more importantly than anything, the fact that it was a woman had encouraged her to seek help.

“Mn? The other side of the boulder? Could you maybe come here instead?”

“That’s, umm, I’m kind of stuck here at the moment…”

“Then just wait a little, okay? I’ll grab some clothes and shoes, and head there once I’m changed.”

Mira fell silent.

If she needed to go get clothes, then didn’t that mean that this woman was currently naked?
Mira had checked many times. There was no sign of any humans in this forest. What was a woman doing walking about naked here!?

——C-, Could it be that she's on a lover's rendezvous…?

Just thinking that had turned Mira bright red.
And then that bright red turned deathly white.

If she was on a rendezvous with a lover, then of course, that meant there was a man nearby. If the two of them came here, they'd see her squatting here with her whole butt on display. No, even if it was just the woman, it wouldn't change the fact that it was embarrassing.

Mira frantically called out to stop her.

"S-Stop please. It's a bit problematic for you to come over right now…"

"Oh. Really? That's troubling. I actually wanted to ask you for a favour, but… Ah, I know!"

Apparently the woman had thought of something.
Mira waited patiently.

After a while, the woman's voice came again.

"I'm going to fly it overrr. Catch it, okayy?"

*Eh? Catch what?**

Before Mira could ask, something glid gently through the air, to land before her eyes.

When Mira first saw it soar through the air, she thought it was a paper kite. In fact, her master was a kite enthusiast. It was his dream to create a kite large enough to ride on. To support him, she helped with the schematics and materials, but for some reason the villagers stopped them in a panic.
Because she had read through various books on paper kite making from the capital, she had a little confidence in her knowledge of them.
But when she reached out and picked up the paper, she found that it was different to any paper kite she knew.

The thing in her hands had been created through folding.
With a pointed head, and a set of wings, it brought the image of a bird to mind.
Was the repeatedly folded head, and the weight added to it, done in order to modify its centre of gravity and lifting power?
Curious about how it was made, she unfolded it, and it became a piece of paper in her hands.

Mira gasped.

It was said that the rich merchants of the Capital used not leaves, but *paper*, to wipe their butts!

This woman had surely known about Mira's predicament, and sent this to help her, while tactfully pretending not to know anything.

Although Mira felt it was a waste to do this to such a curiously-folded kite, the woman said that she had some favour she needed to ask as well.

"Hey, did it reach you?" urged the woman.

Mira resolved herself. She needed to return this favour.

Just before she wiped her butt, some words became visible under the moonlight, but she paid no heed and wiped, before throwing the paper into the hole, and then burying it up.
After fixing her clothing, she climbed onto the boulder. As expected, the woman was on the other side of it. And as expected, she was stark naked.
What was unexpected, was that the woman was not just an ordinary woman.
Mira remembered this mysterious rectangular vehicle with its shining lights.
The woman was the ghost that saved Mira from the arrijighock.
When she first witnessed a ghost, something she had always thought to be imaginary, she was struck with shock, and then fright.
But now that one had saved her from a crisis, not once but twice, even that terror had softened quite a bit.

“Thank you very much. You saved me.”

When Mira came from behind the boulder, she found the woman looking at her with surprise.

“Eh? Saved you? …Or rather, aren’t you the person that was attacked by the arrijighock?”

“Yes. Thank you for helping me that time.”

“You can thank Roten. I didn’t particularly…”

Mira guessed that Roten was the name of the ghost boy.

“Um, this may be an awkward question, but was that insect your familiar, Lady Ghost?”

Now that she was meeting with a ghost for the first time, she found her curiosity welling up.

“Ah, no, I’m not a ghost or anything. Roten isn’t either, of course. Ah, but Roten’s tribe, the Ottko Yu tribe can communicate with arrijighocks, so maybe calling them a familiar isn’t entirely wrong.”

“The Ottko Yu tribe. I have heard of them. The ill-fortuned tribe chased out of the land of sand. If I remember correctly, they made a living digging wells, or something…”

“What the. So you really *are* knowledgeable.”

The ghost …or rather, the naked woman, smiled happily at her.

“Sorry for being so blunt, but could you tell me what that letter before said?”

Mira very nearly failed to swallow her shriek.
That wasn’t paper given to wipe her butt!?

“After you’re done with it, you can do whatever you like with it. It’s just a guess, but I think it will be very helpful to you in the future.”

It was already helpful…

“By the way, where is it?”

Perhaps feeling some doubt about how Mira was tense and silent, the woman sent her a searching gaze.

“Eh? ….Ummm …That… Ummm…”

Her whole body ran with a cold sweat.
The woman said that she wasn’t a ghost, but she was definitely an existence with inhuman and transcendental powers.
If Mira earned her wrath, she might even lose her life.

“Oh? Did it not reach you? Maybe I shouldn’t have used a *paepererr plene*…” muttered the woman, as she scratched her head.

Mire couldn’t bear it any more, and fell to the ground.

“My deepest apologies! My stomach was upset, and after I finished my business I used it to clean myself. I buried it together with the waste, b-but there was something important written on it, wasn’t there!? I will go dig it up. Only, because my stomach was upset, there was a lot of liquid and… whether it can still be read is…”

She really was an idiot. The biggest idiot in all the land. Even though she had just barely survived, here she had gone and thrown her life away again. She couldn’t help but feel regret over not being able to live to see her master fulfil his dreams of soaring the skies.

“Aaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh~~~ No, that was my fault…”

Hearing the stumped voice, Mira looked up to find the woman at her wits end.

“So that’s what you meant when you didn’t want me to come over, huh.”

“Are you not angry?” timidly asked Mira.

The woman simply gave a self-depreciating smile.

“Without knowing what was going on, I even went and asked you for a favour. That was my fault.”

“I really am sorry…”

Mira hung her head. The woman was a surprisingly good person, which made Mira feel all the more pathetic for failing to help her.
She tried to at least remember what she saw under the moonlight. It wasn’t the language used in the Kingdom of Insen, but she recalled her master teaching her in the past.

“Umm, from what I could tell, I think I saw something like “toy” and “custard” or something. That was truly all I saw. How can I possibly apologise…”

“Ummm, don’t be so down, okay? Ah-, I know! I actually have one more favour to ask, so could you maybe help with that? Please lend me your knowledge. I’ve been looking for somebody to read that arrow letter and answer my question, you see.”

“I will do anything I can to be of use,” replied Mira, her face now blossomed into a bright smile.

“Thank goodness. You see, there was actually this ceremony to determine the next chief of the Ottko Yu tribe, and I’m actually wondering about the words of the arrijighock that Roten heard while we were there.”

“The words of the arrijighock?”

“Yes, they kept saying “We can’t stay here” and “It isn’t here” and “Let’s chase after it” and they were looking for sunarabi. And also, Yuataree, ah, Yuataree is Roten’s big sister, you see. She’s also the new chief, and she said that the insects had been murmuring something over and over again. So, it’s just a thought, okay? If all the sunarabi have disappeared

somewhere, then the arrijighock will be starved for food, right? Then won't that mean the Ottko Yu tribe will be thrown into a crisis as well? After all, they depend on each other, the tribe and the arrijighock."

"That makes sense."

"And so what I wanted to ask was, where exactly have the sunarabi gone? ——Actually, now that I mention it, you were holding sunarabi the last time we met, weren't you… Where was that?"

Mira could boast of her carelessness. But the woman in front of her seemed to be a good match in that respect.

"This is the Kingdom of Insen. We're situated to the west-northwest of the land of sand, Yohk'Zai."

"…Then, does that mean we're quite far from the Ottko Yu tribe?"

"I don't know where exactly the Ottko Yu tribe are living, but I suspect we are quite far from them."

"I suppose we would be. Aah, geez, why did the sunarabi move so far away. Isn't there any way we can get them to go back? Could we use the arrijighock to herd them back, or something?"

Mira held her chin in thought for a while, before shaking her head.

"Even if we chase them back, I do not believe that we could return them to where the Ottko Yu tribe are living. First, let us think about why the sunarabi moved to begin with."

Mira firmly believed that everything had a reason.
From the changes in the shape of the moon, to the reason that *appas* fell from trees, none of it happened 'just because'. There was always a reason. There was an incident that happened half a year after her teacher first moved to their village. The *baabaas* in Mira's family, as well as the neighbouring households, suddenly started having trouble producing milk. The adults all ignored the issue, and wrote it off with the reason, "Well, this

stuff happens sometimes."
Sometimes there would be a lot of milk, and sometimes there would be less. One day, the *baabaas* would start producing milk again, they reasoned, and left it alone.
But Mira couldn't help but wonder. The *baabaas* in her family were all young, and ate a lot too, so she couldn't think of why they wouldn't be producing milk any more.
Mira couldn't help but want to find out why. And so she skipped school, and spent the whole day following them around. She waited until her family fell asleep, and then with a pillow in one hand, she waited through the night by the *baabaas'* side, and finally came upon the reason.

——There were flees in the *baabaa* beddings.

The *baabaas* were being bitten by the many flees, and because of the discomfort, they stopped producing milk.
In addition to the answer, Mira also received itching all over her body, her father's fist on her head, as well as his thanks for her troubles.
The villagers immediately burned all the bedding, and after that began smoking the flees.
This incident gave Mira confidence, and conviction.
Everything happened for a reason.

The sunarabi hadn't simply left their old home 'just because'. They hadn't simply come to the Kingdom of Insen 'just because'.
The arrijighock chased after the sunarabi.
Then what were the sunarabi chasing after, that brought them all the way here?

Mira's thoughts immediately brought her into a world of silence.

The abnormalities in the lake. The muddied forest. The sunarabi that appeared from the hole, and the arrijighock that tunnelled through the earth.
——Finally, the ancient profession of the Ottko Yu.

The many untied threads came together into a single rope.

"The sunarabi were chasing after the water!"

“Eh? Water?”

“That’s right. The underground water currents changed. The sunarabi I found had come out from the ground. The sunarabi probably move between the surface and the subterranean water currents. The reason that the Ottko Yu tribe were able to dig wells in the past was because the arrijighock preyed on the sunarabi, and the tribe could use them to determine the underground water flows!”

“Oohh!” exclaimed the woman, as she clapped in applaud. “In that case, the Ottko Yu probably can’t keep living where they are now, huh.”

Mira nodded.

The problem would extend beyond just the Ottko Yu tribe. If the underground water currents had changed, it would affect lands everywhere. Insen as well.
Mira produced the *zhaltkane* from her pocket.

“What’s that?”

“*Zhaltkane*. Would you be so kind as to look at it?”

Mira passed the *zhaltkane* over, and the woman examined it curiously from various angles.

“It’s a produce for flavouring that my village cultivates, but because of the changes in the water table, we might not be able to any longer…”

Mira’s voice was dark. How was she going to break this news to the villagers who were depending on this for their livelihoods?

“I see. So it isn’t only the Ottko Yu that’s troubled. Hmmm… To be honest, I think I’ve gone way past just ‘meddling’ by now…” muttered the woman, powerlessly. “Should I let Roten know first? But then…”

The woman groaned.

“Hahh, I guess I’m just going to rest for today. Gotta wake up early tomorrow. This was a, uh, *zhaltkane* was it? Could I take this? If I don’t take something from here, I might not be able to connect to the next person.”

Mira didn’t understand what she was talking about, but it was nothing to lose a *zhaltkane* or two. She immediately consented.

The woman lifted her arms wearily, and placed a hand against the rim of the vehicle.
A rattling sound reached Mira’s ears, and then the entrance shut.
Just before the woman disappeared, Mira remembered.

It wasn’t “toy”, it was “boy”. And it wasn’t “custard”, it was “custody.”

“That letter! It said “boy” and “custody”!”

Mira quickly shouted *just* before, far from only the woman, even the vehicle disappeared without a trace——

Oh gods. I haven’t washed my hands yet…

TL:
“things became so busy that you would even want the help of a khat.”
If you replace khat with ‘cat’, you get a Japanese saying that means ‘super busy’.

Couldn’t think of an English equivalent, sorry.

Also, zhaltkane looks like sugarcane.

Chapter 19

Under the starry heavens, a man hummed as he stirred a pot.
Ingredients that seemed to be mushrooms and vegetables bobbed up and down in the boiling liquid.
The white steam spread freely an appetising aroma, as it drifted into the sky.

Izumi's stomach growled.
It had been a few hours since dinner, and she was feeling a little peckish now.
But she knew that if she ate now, she would regret it much later on.

"The coconasso will be done soon, so wait just a little, okay?"

Hearing Izumi's stomach, the man smiled amiably, before accepting the zhaltkane from her.
He pressed a knife against its bamboo-like opening, and split it open.

"I've told you many times already. I'm fine."

"Come now, don't be shy."

"No, I'm not being shy about it. I told you, if I eat before I sleep, I'll get fat so I don't need it."

The man stopped his stirring hand, and carefully beheld her.

"You have nothing to worry about. In fact, I think getting a little fatter would do you good."

"If I let my guard down because of your words, I'll become a fatty in the blink of an eye!"

“Really? But, look, there’s really nothing in here but mushrooms and vegetables. You’ll really be fine. Honest.”

Izumi sighed at his irresponsible words.
Oh? Wasn’t Coconasso the fantastic food that saved Tohji from famine?
Then wasn’t it also perhaps high in calories?
Paying no attention to Izumi, the man places slices of zhaltkane into a mortar and began to grind.

“My, you’ve really helped me out. To be honest, Coconasso Hotpot is really no good without a good dash of zhalt. Ah, it’s not that I hate it or anything, okay? It’s just that after eating the same thing for ten days…”

A complicated look of grief appeared on the man’s face, as he gazed into the distance.

“Now then, time for the finishing touches.”

After scraping the mashed zhalt into the pot, he gave it a light mix, and then tried the taste with a big spoon.

“Mn, yummy. It really does bring out the taste,” nodded the man with a smile.

After spooning it into one of two wooden bowls, he held it out to Izumi.

“Here. I wonder when the last time I shared a meal was. After all, I’ve been travelling alone for a looooooooooooooooooooooooooooong time.”

Apparently he had already decided that she would be eating.
Izumi reluctantly accepted it.

“Itadakimasu.”

When she tried a spoon of the thick, white soup, what she first experienced was a gentle, mildly sweet taste. Passing down her throat, was this umami flavour the zhalt?

“How is it?”

She could see the expectation in the eyes of the man. When he tilted his head a little, the tied, shoulder-length silver hair made a pleasant sound.

“Aah, yeah… It’s delicious,” she replied, eyes still glued to his hair.

This person… really is Princess Aqua’s brother, isn’t he…

Rare for a man, he had a beautiful face, and it closely resembled Princess Aqua’s.
Most importantly, his rare silver hair was proof of royalty.
He was the Prince of Jebas, who heard the Old Maestro’s tales of the world-travelling Conyork the Second, and who then left the country himself.
And he was now sitting in front of her, slurping coconasso soup.

Izumi stole glances at him, as she slurped from her bowl.
If he returned to Jebas, then wouldn’t the King, Princess Aqua, Utaseyu and Aschu all become happy?
But this was a prince who ran away from his own country. If she clumsily brought things up, then he might run away.
Not only that, but ‘to make the people of your motherland happy, become a sacrifice for them’ wasn’t right to her. No, but then, shouldn’t he at least return before Princess Aqua came of age?
Izumi continued to watch him, as she was confused by her own half-baked thoughts.

“It’s good, isn’t it,” smiled the Prince, who met her gaze.

“It is,” she replied without much thought――

After she heard the news last night from the woman with the stomach problems, at first she thought that she needed to tell Roten.

But then when she placed her hand against the window, she hesitated.

What if the people of the Ottko Yu tribe abandoned their current village to live together witht he arrijighock?
If they followed the sunarabi and arrijighock, in the future they would only been se as invaders, wouldn’t they?

It wasn't guaranteed that the final destination of the sunarabi would be uninhabited like the plain with the tree.
Since she was seen as an angel, she couldn't give careless advice to them.

Because of that, Izumi wished to be connected to somebody who could solve the problem, or perhaps somebody who give her a clue, but…
Why then, was it this person?

"Umm… is there something on my face?"

His words made her realise that she had been staring, and she looked down.

"Aah, I'm sorry for being impolite. It was nothing."

Even she knew that she was being awfully suspicious, but the Prince showed little sign of minding, and simply replied,

"Really?"

before going back to his soup.

"You've been travelling alone for a long time, right? Do you have some goal?"

"Hmmm. Good question. I suppose to widen my world-view?"

I see. He's probably following the footsteps of Conyork the Second.

Izumi was impressed with him.
But then, the Prince furrowed his brows, and then shook his head.

"No, I'll stop this. I'm sorry, I was just putting on airs. I'm simply out having fun. It's incredibly fun to wander here and there, and experience various cultures and specialty products. At the moment, my source of income is from using various materials that I've gotten, and selling balms made from them. But well, what's actually been getting me the most money recently is the soaps and bathing powders that I sell on the side."

"SOAPS AND BATHING POWDERS!?"

When he came clean, at first she considered trying to convince him to return and discuss things with Princess Aqua, but his next words blew such thoughts right out of her mind.

“Yes. The soap can be used from head to toe. Once you try it, your skin becomes smooth and without blemish. Not only that, but the bathing powder is multi-purpose, dealing with things from moisturisation to anti-perspiration. It’s extremely popular with housewives.”

Izumi’s eyes glittered. She couldn’t just swallow his story, but then again she had already experienced mysteries like the fire stone, or the frostsnow grass, so she believed in him just a little.

“Shall I give you one to try? As thanks for the zhaltkane.”

“IS THAT OKAY!? …Ummm, should I bring you something? I know. I got some good liquor the other day…”

In her joy, Izumi was about to climb through the window, but she suddenly grew embarrassed about openly wanting it so much.

“Nono, it would be unthinkable to accept anything else from an angel. Please, take this.”

The Prince opened up a large sack, and retrieved from within an olive bar of soap, and a porcelain jar wrapped in cloth.

“Froth up the soap well, and as for the bathing powder… Let’s see. If it’s a bath the size of that one, then perhaps two spoons would do? Please test the amount as you go.”

“Wah! Thank you. This might be the happiest trade I’ve ever made.”

Izumi gleefully accepted it.
Upon opening the lid of the jar, she was met by a fragrance similar to roses. Not only that, but unlike the forceful rose smells of the bath powder she already used, this one was natural-smelling, fresh, and refreshing.

“What a nice smell. It’s amazing. You made this yourself, huh.”

The Prince nodded at her.

“Yes. From collecting the ingredients, to doing the mixing, all of it was done by me. But still, to think that at the end of my journey, not only would I dine with an angel, but that angel would so happily accept something I created. I really am a lucky one.”

The Prince gave a genuinely happy smile.

“Eh? End… of your journey?”

“Yes.”

Izumi stared inside the jar. When she breathed on it, the powder danced like sand.

“Could it be that this is why you gave this to me?”

“No, certainly not. Well, it is the last one, but…”

“Then how come?”

“Once I return to my country, I won’t have the time to work hard at creating medicines or bath powders any longer. To begin with, I wouldn’t be able to obtain the ingredients any longer.”

I see…

Izumi hung her head in dejection, but then shook it vigorously to expel those thoughts.
It was a happy thing for those waiting at home for him.
And what would become of her as a person if she valued bathing powder to this extent.

“But, why so suddenly?”

“A storm is…”

No sooner had he spoken did the Prince fall silent, gazing up into the sky.

Izumi watched him think, and waited for his next words, but the Prince stopped moving completely, as though his heart had been taken by the stars.

Under the moonlight, his silver hair glittered like a jewel.

Frozen like that, his beautiful face made him seem like a doll with no soul.

“What about a storm?”

The Prince seemed somehow terrifying, as he was absorbed with the night sky, so Izumi urged him to continue.

“The storm in I’Jibro. Before long, my country will also be…”

For just an instant, the Prince turned a desperate look to Izumi. But he immediately lowered his gaze, and then smiled as though it had never happened.

“The reason that I’m going back to my country, is because I’m going back to where I belong. That’s all.”

While the Prince seemed to have gotten over something, in contrast Izumi was panicked.

“W-Wait, wait. What do you mean ‘storm in I’Jibro’? What happened to Prince Hinoki!?”

“Prince Hinoki… Aah, the tragic prince of I’Jibro.”

“Yeah, the one that was confined in the tower by his step-mother! He better have left the tower!”

After her reflexive threat, she came back to her senses. The Prince of Jebas had nothing to do with it.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised, but the Prince shook his head and told her not to mind.

“Prince Hinoki. Yes, I hear that he left the tower.”

Izumi fell to the ground in relief.

Thank goodness. You managed to get out.

Tears of joy gathered in her eyes, but his next words made that joy vanish.

“Because the place he’s confined now is the Yohk’Zai royal castle.”

“Huh?”

“Prince Hinoki is presently confined in Yohk’Zai. Do you know him?”

“…Why…?”

“Eh?”

“Why is he confined in Yohk’Zai’s royal castle!? Who did it!? Who trapped him somewhere like that! …Could it be that Queen Akka…”

Had Huuron failed? It couldn’t be that Queen Akka killed him…
Izumi blanched at the horrifying thought.

“Why would Queen Akka be the one to trap him in Yohk’Zai’s castle?”

The Prince’s voice was deeply confused.
Izumi questioned him in a trembling voice.

“Then who did it?”

“King Huuron of course.”

It felt like something had struck her in the head.
When she heard ‘Yohk’Zai’ earlier, she had also considered this, somewhere in her heart. But she simply didn’t want to believe it.

“But, why would he… What about Queen Akka?”

“Queen Akka has passed away.”

Izumi gazed at the Prince of Jebas in a daze.

“An explosion of unknown origins occurred in the castle. It was reduced to rubble, and Queen Akka was discovered beneath that rubble.”

“Explosion?”

Her heart skipped a beat.
She recalled what those soldiers had been desperately protecting, and suddenly it felt like her chest was being crushed.

“They say that because of the tragedy at the castle and the death of his step-mother, Prince Hinoki was in no state to govern due to the emotional shock. Because of that, King Huuron sheltered the Prince, and was also asked by him to govern I’Jibro in his stead… Or so the rather convenient story goes. Anybody with the slightest desire to think would realise the truth.”

——Wine and gunpowder.
Huuron had told her the contents of the carts.

“King Huuron had come to I’Jibro’s royal castle, there just happened to be an explosion, Queen Akka and many high officials just happened to be casualties, and Yohk’Zai’s soldiers just happened to be completely unharmed. How could anything so convenient happen by change.”

“——Is it… my fault?”

“Sorry?”

The Prince furrowed his beautiful brows at Izumi’s feeble mutter.

“I asked him to. When he was on the way to I’Jibro, I asked him to save Prince Hinoki from the tower. So Huuron…”

“Please calm down. That should absolutely not be the case.”

The Prince firmly rebuked her.
Izumi sluggishly raised her head.

“Because you asked him on the way, King Huuron took possession of the I’Jibro castle? Do you think he could destroy the castle and take over I’Jibro with no preparations at all? Of course he had planned to do this with his soldiers from the start.”

In other words, even before Izumi’s request, Huuron had known about Queen Akka’s trap, and still intended to march to I’Jibro.

“With Prince Hinoki as a good reason, nobody in I’Jibro would be able to revolt against him. While everybody gazed on in shock, I’Jibro fell under Yohk’Zai’s rule――regardless of whatever they say on the surface.”

“And now, King Huuron is going to bear his fangs against Jebas…”

Izumi was calm again.
According to Prince Hinoki, Jebas was called a paradise. She knew why Huuron was aiming for it.
She recalled his eyes filled with brilliance――and the ambitions that burnt behind it.

“So you really did know who I was, Angel.”

How could she not. Just look at his hair.

“The Prince of Jebas, right? Because Princess Aqua almost got married to a much older man, she really hates you now, you know.”

The Prince’s handsome face cramped a little.

“What on earth is Father thinking… No, I suppose I’m not one to talk.”

Both this Prince and Princess Aqua were beautiful. If it was their father, surely he was beautiful too, or so she thought as she was imagining his face when, suddenly, a bearded man came to mind.

“But wait, isn’t there Triht in between Jebas and Yohk’Zai? As I recall, the leader of Triht, Setsugen, was looking for Yohk’Zai’s fire stones.”

Could it be that Triht joined hands with Yohk’Zai?

“Triht is in a crisis right now. Apparently the ground is frozen, and they need fire stones. And so they asked Yohk’Zai for assistance, but Yohk’Zai rejected them. With their backs to the wall, Triht declared war on them.”

“That can’t be… They told me that fire stones could be found lying about just anywhere.”

“Just because it is a common stone, you believe it natural to offer it out of the kindness of your heart?”

Izumi looked at the Prince.
His tone was unexpectedly grim.

“That is wrong. Even a common stone is still an asset of Yohk’Zai’s. If Triht needed fire stones no matter what, they would have no choice but to enter into negotiations with Yohk’Zai. If that wasn’t possible, they would need to take other measures. If you gave aid without reward, Triht would grow used to having things handed to them. And Triht would rot because of it. ——Things you receive without paying back for will end up hindering you.”

Izumi could only stay silent.
The Prince tilted his head, and smiled amiably. Suddenly, his severe aura disappeared.

“——Just kidding. That was a saying handed down in a certain Yohk’Zai village. I just wanted to try saying it once. On an individual level, you are most definitely correct. But most of Yohk’Zai is covered by sand. You couldn’t call it fertile. If they saved Triht for free, the citizens would surely find it unforgivable.”

However he interpreted her silence, the Prince took her hand to comfort her.

“As an angel, it can’t be helped that you’re unfamiliar with the circumstances of the lower world. Were everybody as selfless as you…”

He was wrong.
Izumi wasn’t selfless at all. Even just now, her feelings prioritised bathing

powder over the people waiting for this Prince.
No human was selfless.

“Triht erred in their choice. Now that I’Jibro has fallen into the hands of Yohk’Zai, Triht will stand little chance. And King Huuron has gained yet another excuse. An excuse to destroy Triht, you see. And using Triht as a foothold, Jebas would be next…”

After the Prince bitterly declared this, a strong wind extinguished the campfire.

The moon seemed even brighter, and illuminated the surroundings.

The overlapping mountains of sand were blown into new shapes.

Somewhere in this very desert, Prince Hinoki was held captive.

Izumi recalled the words the Insen woman had shouted during their parting. She hadn’t managed to catch it all, but it was surely about Prince Hinoki…

“Hey, Prince of Jebas. It really is my fault after all,” she quietly declared.

His eyes grew dark as he watched her.

“They were seeds that I sowed. That’s why…”

“You’ll reap them yourself?”

“No.”

Izumi shook her head.

“Things are going to get a little busy for me. Perhaps I might need to borrow your strength in the future. When that time comes, would you perhaps lend it to me?”

“As you wish, Angel.”

As the Prince of Jebas bowed reverently, she bade him goodbye and closed the window.

Just as she told him, Izumi was about to become busy. Relaxing in the bath would have to wait.

She was going to have to meet a great many people. And she was going to have to talk with them.

But she had already decided who she would be meeting first.

Izumi closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

She remembered the face of the man with the earrings.

“The King of the Desert, descended from Yohk’Zai’s Founding King, Tenuhg. Please. Connect me to him.”

Izumi lent an ear to the pounding of her heart as she opened the window.

Please. Connect me to him.

——And as she prayed for this in her heart…

One chapter left until the end.

TL: ^ That was the author’s note.

Chapter 20

“Leave.”

With the man’s one word, the servant who had brought the alcohol immediately bowed, and disappeared.
After confirming that he was alone, the man poured himself a cup of the drink that the servant had just carried in.
The lights were all off.
The one pleasure this man had was to keep torch and moonstone away, and enjoy wine in this garden.
He found the dim light of the moon just right for him.

Rotus flowers floated in the pond before him.
Beautiful fish of various coloured swam around the pink petals, and the round leaves around them.
The pond itself was shockingly big.

As the man gazed upon the moon on the water’s surface, he brought the drink to his lips. And the corners of his mouth curved naturally into a smile.
Visiting this place always gave him a sense of reality about the size of what he had obtained.

His birthplace had been an impoverished village.
The water well was so tiny that it could dry at any time, and they lived their lives while carefully sharing it between them.
The crops wouldn’t grow well either, and the men of the village earned money by accompanying travelling merchant groups on particularly dangerous journeys.
He too had crossed the desert as a bodyguard of a merchant troupe.
Although the dangers of his job had brought him close to death, the man remained poor. Always——

But how about now.
A castle replete with abundant water.
A completely extravagant lifestyle.
When he thought of the ridiculousness of his being brought here and made King, he found his laughter impossible to restrain.

——But there was still a long way to go. He would make even larger things his.

The man was very clear about what he was going to do, as well as what he wanted to achieve.

The only concern he had was the naked, or very close to naked woman who occasionally appeared.
He had jokingly told his retainers that she was a goddess, but in fact he didn't believe that one bit.
She certainly had a mysterious power. She had that container overflowing with water, and she could appear in various places.

But that seemed to be all.

She had mysterious powers, but the woman herself was just a regular woman. That was how he saw her.

Having saved his life, and led him to I'Jibro, that woman had gotten in his way three times.
So the man believed in his instinct, and made preparations so that she wouldn't interfere any further with the future he painted for himself.
Considering her support for Prince Hinoki of I'Jibro, as well as the Ottko Yu boy, he immediately knew that she was weak to children.

Not only that, from the fact that she couldn't save the Prince herself and the fact that she even sought help, it was clear that she was far from omnipotent.
He was sure that with just a little threat, she would be beside herself with terror. Thinking this, he wrote her a letter and then attached it to an arrow.
——As he recalled, he wrote something about crushing the kid's finger each time she interfered, or perhaps something about cutting off his nose

and ears…
Either way, it was things that only scum would say.

If she was a boring woman as expected, then she would probably stop meddling out of fear for Prince Hinoki.
When he imagined the face she would make when she saw the letter, his face betrayed another smile.

Feeling quite happy, he swirled his drink.
He liked his drinks strong enough that they felt like they burnt his throat.

After his first cup, he regretted sending the servant away.
He had been doing this since morning, and perhaps because he hadn't had much to eat, he wanted something to chew on.
Whenever he told his servants to clear out, he would always have them at a distance where his voice wouldn't reach.

——*Can't be helped. Should I go to the kitchen, and threaten a cook?*

The man stood up. And the moment he did, a white light shone above the pond.

"Here's your order! The ultimate delicacy that goes with distilled wines, fruit wines, sweet rice wines, nigori wine, anything! Cured mullet roe cheese!"

Pitch black hair that ran down white shoulders. The woman appeared half-naked again, rambling energetically no sooner than she had arrived.

"Hell yeah! Got the right guy! It's been a while!"

The man looked on in dumb amazement as the woman pumped a fist in joy.

——*Why…*

The man couldn't believe that his assessment was off. He was proud to say that he was better at reading people than anybody else.

"Oh? What's wrong? Ah, I know. Here, take these."

The woman tilted her head in confusion for a while, before apparently remembering to pass over the dish in her hand.

“You wanted some snacks to go with your drink, right?”

“…Yeah.”

Only after he accepted it had he come back to his senses.

“What do you plan to ask of me this time?”

The first time he had just given her the earrings.
However, the next time they made an exchange, for her map she demanded something as ridiculous as saving Prince Hinoki.
What on earth did she plan on asking this time…?

The man studied her carefully.

Her face showed no signs of terror nor fright. The man felt immense regret. He had no choice but to accept that he had completely misread her. She was not so fragile nor merciful that she would back down because of threats to that prince.

It was impossible to tell if she knew what he was thinking, but she smiled as though she had waited for that exact question.

“It’s simple. First, release Prince Hinoki. Second, stop your troops in Triht.”

He snorted.

“What part of that is simple.”

“It’s terribly simple. I can’t understand what part isn’t.”

Anger surged up at her carefree response.

“Then let’s say I release him. Are you telling me to send him to I’Jibro? Even if he’s a child, I can’t imagine a person who had his country stolen

from him twice is fit to rule. He's just going to get locked up somewhere again."

It was impossible to let go of I'Jibro now. Doing so now would be the same as withholding reward from his soldiers. The man's strong point was the army in his grasp. If he neglected his soldiers, then his footing would become shaky in no time.
But the woman flapped her hand dismissively.

"I'm not telling you to send him to I'Jibro, nor did I say to make him king."

"What?"

"I've actually met him already. As long as you accept one condition, he'll hand I'Jibro over to you."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"What condition?"

"The guarantee of the position and assets of the I'Jibro commoners. If you seize assets from the nobles, you'll have enough to offset the funds used to take over I'Jibro, won't you?"

Although it had fallen under his rule, I'Jibro was a bountiful nation, unlike Yohk'Zai which was nothing but sand. The fortunes of the I'Jibro nobles were massive. Just as the woman said, these funds would be more than enough.
But the man couldn't understand what the Prince was thinking at all, to give up his nation, even with this woman as his ally.
Perhaps she guessed his thoughts, because the woman looked down and spoke.

"To Prince Hinoki, who should have been locked in that tower for life, do you know what his greatest treasure is?"

"Can't say I do."

“A map, he said. A world map. He would always stare at it and think to himself that if by some miracle he ever left that tower, he would travel the entire world. He has no interest in the throne. Instead, he despises it. Is it really that strange once you think about it? Because of that throne, he was locked up for a second time.”

The man sighed.
There were no demerits to following her idea, but he didn’t want to do as she told him to.

“Then what about Triht? That country is apparently frozen now. Wouldn’t their citizens be happier under our rule? At the very least, they would be able to live without starving. I’ll say this first, but I’m not giving them fire stones. That lot from Triht first asked us for aid, then the next time they began speaking nonsense about sending them fire stones. Those fire stones might not be worth much in Yohk’Zai, but they need to be handled carefully. Are you telling me to have them carried up those damned mountains for free?”

“It’s fine. I can’t say that they’ll give as much gold and silver as you want, but Triht can be of use to Yohk’Zai.”

The man furrowed his brows.

“It’s impossible for them to have anything like that.”

It was because they didn’t that they declared war with Yohk’Zai.

“Triht has exceptional blacksmithing. The Triht swords are currently very popular in Jebas. As you know, Jebas is a bountiful country that people often call a paradise. In fact, even their culture is a few steps ahead of other nations. And yet Jebas still can’t create a sword as sharp as Triht’s, and are trying to buy as many of them as they can.”

The man recalled the face of the young Triht king, who was the very model of honesty.

“That Setsugen is terrible at negotiations. If he had something like that, he should have mentioned it sooner. I’ll buy those swords. No need to deal with Jebas.”

The woman laughed.

“You must be joking. Who on earth would give fangs and claws to the very beast trying to hunt them down?”

“So you want to say that Jebas is safe, then? It’s *because* they’re so plentiful that they might be aiming for hegemony.”

“No need to worry. Jebas is a religious nation. Invading another country goes against the first of their 47 precepts. Even a king wouldn’t be forgiven if they violated this. Jebas is a sleeping dragon. And that dragon is holding Triht’s sword. You have no chance of winning.”

The man ground his teeth as he glared at her. She smiled triumphantly in return.

“Well? You don’t have any reason to confine Prince Hinoki or attack Triht anymore, do you?”

“Aye. Exactly as you say.”

When he spat that out, the woman’s eyes looked at him hopefully.

“Then-”

But he thrust the plate of snacks right in front of those eyes.

“But I think I’ll refuse. I do regret having to give these back to you though.”

His desires were not limited to just I’Jibro or Jebas. With those two nations in his hand, he could destroy even larger nations.

——It was no big deal. All he had to do was destroy Triht before they could complete the swords. He had the initiative.

The woman sighed sadly.

“Don’t misunderstand. I didn’t come here to ask you a favour.”

She stared right at him.

“I came here to threaten you. You have no choice *except* to obey. Isn’t that right——Karasu?”

“Karasu? Who is that supposed to be…?”

When he heard that name, his vision went blurry, and he only remained standing by force of will.
He couldn’t let her see his discomposure. He pretended to remain calm, but just how successful had he been?”

“Kyousui is healthy, by the way. She’s living happily with Huuron. Ah, that reminds me, I think she’s pregnant too. Doesn’t that make you happy as her older brother?”

Ignoring the man——ignoring Karasu——the woman continued to blather on and on.
He held no lingering affection to the name he had as a child, but when he heard the nostalgic name of his sister, he failed to lie to himself any longer.
With the snack dish still in hand, he sat down atop the gorgeous rug spread by the pond’s edge.
The retainers——particularly the army——only followed Karasu so blindly because they saw Tenuhg in his overbearing way of doing things.
Tenuhg was still the Hero of Yohk’Zai to them. Even that cunning Teo Keh had blindly followed him too.
It was clear as day what would happen if the woman he himself declared as a goddess, went and announced to the world that he was an imposter.

“…How long have you known?”

It was pointless to resist any further. Having judged so, Karasu surrendered.

“I guess… since you gave me the earrings?”

“Hah. I really am filled with awe. So you knew everything from the start.”

“Not everything. I always thought it was weird when I realised that the stains on the earrings were blood. You should have been wearing them for over ten years, so why would you bleed that much?

“My suspicions only grew larger after you gave me that mantle. Since it seemed expensive, I wanted to return it, and I was connected to none other than Kyousui… and a man with red earrings.

“You know, this window connects me to the person I want to see.

“That’s why I was puzzled about it.

“As for when I was sure that he was the real Huuron, it happened a little earlier when I met the Prince of Jebas.

“——Things you receive without paying back for will end up hindering you——

“I always thought that it was a saying of Yohk’Zai, but that’s not right, is it. The Prince of Jebas told me that it was a saying passed down in a certain village in Yohk’Zai.

“And I had heard this same saying from the man who had been with Kyousui.”

The earrings and mantle he gave as payments had completely divulged his lies.

“I guess the earrings really weren’t enough.”

To think that the dated aphorism from his home town would come true and actually hinder him…
A laugh of self-mockery escaped Karasu’s lips.

“Perhaps they weren’t.”

The woman simply shrugged.

“Just to let you know, Huuron won’t agree to becoming King.”

“I could tell that from a glance. Rather than his grandfather, he’s more like his father, isn’t he. That’s why you helped him escape with your sister, right? I doubt it was purely kindness and familial love that drove you thought.”

Karasu snorted again.

It was just as she said. When the soldiers turned up looking for Iyoh’s son, Karasu realised from Huuron’s personal history that this was an opportunity of a lifetime.
It wasn’t that he had no feelings for his sister, and Huuron, his childhood friend. But his desire for advancement had been a greater driving factor than his worry for them.

“So you can just keep living as Huuron, the King of Yohk’Zai. As long as you release Prince Hinoki, and make peace with Triht, that is.”

——*I see. A threat.*

Karasu sighed. How could he refuse.

“Ah, also, I also have a few things I want your help with. Don’t worry, it’s all really simple stuff.”

This woman’s ‘simple’ was always anything but.

“What do you want?” asked Karasu, a little wearily.

“Did you know that some of the underground water currents have changed? It’s causing problems in eastern Insen.
On the other hand, the home of the Ottko Yu tribe that you’ve been picking on has lost its water current, and this small animal called the sunarabi has gone along with it.
Worse, the arrijighock that the Ottko Yu use, actually feed on those Sunarabi, and have moved away as well.”

“Don’t tell me that since the arrijighock have followed the sunarabi to Insen, you want me to prepare that land for them? If you’re fine with me destroying Insen, I don’t mind helping out though.”

The woman shook her hands in panic.

“No, that’s not it! Why did you suddenly come to such a crazed conclusion.”

After giving a tired sigh, the woman continued speaking.

“The sunarabi aren’t going to Insen. A few of them have, but they’ll disappear from there before long. That’s what Mira told me… aah, umm, Mira is a helper I have in the Kingdom of Insen.
She’s a genius, but she’s also kind of a scatterbrain, but anyway, she’s definitely really knowledgeable and she was certain that the sunarabi wouldn’t be coming to Insen. By the way, do you know of the Witch in Black of I’Jibro?”

“Is it a story of a witch that takes away bad children? Like any other made-up story to discipline children?”

The woman shook her head.

“According to Mira, the true form of the Witch in Black is actually the arrijighock. In the past, the arrijighock appeared as far as the I’Jibro Capital. A number of children really went missing. But right now they don’t leave the Ottko Yu area in the north. And that’s not because the Ottko Yu tribe have been making them stay there.

“The sand, huh.”

Karasu answered it for her.

“Correct! The sunarabi that appeared in Insen hated mud. Both the sunarabi and the arrijighock can only live in dry land.”

There was water underground. He finally knew what she wanted.

“You’re demanding I give them a place to live?”

“You say it rather harshly, but yes.”

The woman grumbled with a frown.
Karasu crossed his arms and sneered.

“Even if I have I’Jibro, Yohk’Zai is still a poor nation. The lands I have to give are limited as well. If I invite tribes from outside, I’ll be finished even without your little tricks! Are you telling me to do a double suicide with the Ottko Yu tribe?”

“No. Of course it won’t be for free. I’ll have the Ottko Yu tribe work as well.”

“Work?”

“Yes, they used to use the arrijighock to dig wells in the desert. I’ll have them do it again.”

“Are you telling me to change desert into fertile land? We’ll starve before anything sprouts.”

“Of course I wouldn’t ask for the impossible like that. But you can at least create an oasis, right?”

Karasu frowned. There were a number of oases. While he had been lost in the desert, that oasis city he visited was one of them. Not only that, but there were merchants who travelled between the Capital to each oasis. Though those journeys were never as tough as the ones Karasu and his fellow villagers had braved themselves, often using routes plagued with aridity and bandits.

“So let’s create oases and establish trade routes!”

While he was caught off guard, she pressed him further.

“Moonstones from I’Jibro, zhaltkane from Insen, hahanero and glass from Jebas, frostsnow grass from Triht, coconasso from Tohji, and zora beans

from Sunayu. Don't you think trade could improve the living standards of every country? Right now the Tohji King is after zhaltkane for his new wife, and Jebas is particularly hungry for moonstones. As for Yohk'Zai, they need hahanero to keep arrijighock away as well. Even the frostsnow grass that you made fun of has its share of demand. After all, it really does make cheap wine taste like fine wine!"

Karasu was taken aback as the woman insisted with clenched fists.

"So you're going to establish some oases, use the soldiers you prepared to invade Triht to protect merchants, and in exchange you can tax them, or charge a bodyguard's feed, or demand recompense."

"And also," she continued,

"It won't only be goods crossing the desert. People can be moved too. Most urgently, we'll be able to move skilled water engineers across the desert from Tohji, to help protect Insen from water damage. Mira of Insen, and King Cornou of Tohji. If the geniuses of the east and west rack their brains together, I think most problems can be solved. No, I'll definitely have them solve everything."

Just how on earth was this simple…

Karasu could feel a headache coming on. Bringing his cup to his lips, he drained the liquor in one gulp.

"So you plan to use me as a manservant."

"Why are you always so harsh with your words. I'm telling you to join hands with everybody, so that everybody benefits together."

With empty cup in hand, Karasu stood up again.
Pointing at the mysterious frame she was in, he glared at her.

"Then get out from there. Just like the people living here, live on the ground and crawl through the mud like the rest of us."

"No."

The woman flatly refused.

“Arrogance! How can you talk about joining hands with everybody. when you alone just spectate and give orders!”

Watching him spit out these words, the woman simply tilted her head in wonder.

“Goodness. Aren’t you the one that called me a goddess? Don’t you know that gods are completely selfish and wilful? All the more so for goddesses,” she declared quite plainly.

His eyes widened, and he was lost for words.
The one who called her that really was nobody but him.
The people worshipped the gods, but the gods were never with the people.

“Ku… Kukuhahahaha!”

For some reason it all suddenly felt unbearably funny, and he began to roar in laughter.
To think that this position of King would turn into the mere manservant of a goddess.
The reason that he swapped places with Huuron was not simply because he sought riches.
He had wanted to test himself. He had wanted to see how far he could go.

But that would end as a fruitless dream.

Karasu reached out for the plate that she now held in her hand, and popped a small slice into his mouth.
The delicious taste of this new snack, tasted more bitter than anything before.

“Aye, you most certainly are a goddess. Now then, O cruel Goddess of mine. Shall we release that Prince first?”

Karasu threw away the cup in his hand, and began to walk forth.

——3rd King of Yohk'Zai, King Huuron
He saved I'Jibro from the tyrannical Queen Akka.
Before the outbreak of war with Triht, he made peace, and avoided bloodshed.
Furthermore, he invited the Ottko Yu tribe back to the desert they had been chased out of, and using their power, he developed trade routes through the desert.
Through these actions, he revived the economy of not only his own country, but those of the neighbouring countries as well.
Together with his later exploits, these achievements caused him to be famed as the Sacred Kingdom of Yohk'Zai's strongest and greatest king——

Author's notes:

Hello.

Thank you for staying with me, and my incredibly slow update speeds. It took a while, but I believe that we got here thanks to all the readers that earnestly stayed with my story until the very end.
Now then, I hope that you will follow me on my next work as well

Afterstory 1 - A Certain Ambitious King

Mountains of sand, changing shape in the wind.
Karasu sighed as he leant against the boulder that shaded him.
The boulder's shadow stretched far across the sand.
It would be evening soon.
Under the red glow of the evening sky, a number of dead men and the corpse of a ruba could be seen.

——*If only the ruba were alive.*

How many times had he wished this already.

But no matter how badly he wished for it, it was fruitless unless he could revert time.

"Create oases and trade routes."

Karasu thought back to the woman who had casually suggested this.

——*Damned goddess of misfortune.*

Karasu cursed to himself.

The oasis creation program had been fraught with problems from the start.
The ones responsible for the all-important task of finding the water veins were the Ottko Yuu tribe, who all hated Karasu to the bone.
It took two months of arguing just to reach a semblance of cooperation.
Furthermore, the movement across the desert made the arrijighock difficult to handle, so just that alone required large amounts of hahanero. The amount grown by the Ottko Yu tribe was nowhere near enough.

Thus, negotiations began with Jebas, the home of hahanero. Unfortunately, standing between Yohk'Zai and Jebas were a steep mountain range, and the nation known as Triht. Worse, Triht's leader, Setsugen, was a stubborn youngster who was difficult to negotiate with.
With Setsugen constantly pestering him for firestones, it took half a year just to secure a route to Jebas. And to trade with the isolationist Jebas took another three months of top of that to begin.

Even though Karasu had been so busy he couldn't even sleep, that damned Goddess had said,

"You're slow. Geez, we can't wait any longer. Whatever. In that case, I'll just bring the Tohjian workers to Insen myself."

Never in his life had he wanted to strangle that woman more.
But despite that, Karasu couldn't oppose her.

While the woman had been happily enjoying her baths, Karasu had been slowly but surely advancing the preparations.
As proof of that, he had already finished constructing one oasis last month.
After sending in material and men, and getting things set up, Karasu had begun working on the second oasis.
That woman had complained to him, but he had still created an oasis in less than a year. How could that be slow.

Karasu was feeling a sense of accomplishment, different to the one when he took I'Jibro.
And the second and third oases didn't seem too difficult either. Now that he had already worked out the specifics of creating one, the rest could be created by following the same lessons.

Back when the woman had first told him to create a trade route, he had thought of it as a ridiculous task. But although he certainly did meet many hardships, things were progressing smoothly.
The control of I'Jibro was going well.
Getting the tariffs in place was close at hand too.
Everything was starting to come together.
It was probably because of this that he had relaxed and gotten conceited.

He had thought that it would be just another trip in the desert. He had already done it once in the past.
It was just riding a ruba for a bit. Hardly dangerous at all. Thinking that, Karasu had headed into the desert by himself without informing any of his men.
Who could have imagined a bandit attack with such unfortunate timing.

Before he was old enough to have his voice break, Karasu had worked as a bodyguard. He had good sense and talent to go with it, and was regarded highly by trading caravans.
Karasu didn't hate using the sword. Neither did he hate fighting. This had not changed since becoming King of Yohk'Zai, and he had always stood on the frontlines with his sword.
Thanks to that he managed to turn the tables on the five bandits.
Unfortunately, in the process he had lost the ruba that was his lifeline.
What made things even worse was that his leg had been slashed. Thankfully it wasn't serious enough for him to haemorrhage to death, but it still made it difficult to walk in the desert.
It would be reckless to attempt travelling a distance that would take half an hour on ruba.

Karasu decided to preserve his energy rather than struggle pointlessly.
So he leant against a boulder and gazed at the half-buried corpses. He spent an hour like that.
Sparkling grains of sand in the wind seemed to paint over the corpses.
Back when he killed the merchants in order to take Huuron's place, had their remains also been buried beneath the sand like this…?
Quite unlike himself, Karasu began to grow sentimental.

"OOOOOOOI, WHERE ARE YOU HUUUUUUROOOOOOOOOOON!"

An angry woman's cry. And at the same time, a rectangular hole was cut into the scenery.
As usual, the woman appeared in front of him wearing only a single cloth.
It was a bother to get up, so Karasu only moved his eyes.

"You're slow. I've been waiting for you," he said.

It was a mysterious feeling.
Until just now, he never had even the faintest expectations that she would save him, but the moment he saw her face, it felt like he had been waiting for her all along.
When the woman spotted him sitting on the sand, she glared at him indignantly.

“What the hell was that!”

“What the hell… was what?”

Of course, he had a rough idea of what she was angry about. Still, he decided to pick an annoying answer.

“That! *That!* That *thing* in the dead middle of the oasis spring, damnit!”

So it was *that* after all. Karasu’s lips curved into a smile.

“Oh, it seems you liked it. I commissioned some famous artist from Jebas.”

After looking lost for a moment, realisation flashed on her face.

“Famous artist… Don’t tell me it was the Old Maestro!?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. That Old Maestro was an acquaintance of yours, wasn’t he.”

The woman collapsed onto her rectangular frame as she groaned “Ugugu…”

Karasu decided to finish her off.

“It was well done. It had a bit more meat on it, so it was more to my taste.”

When he had visited Jebas, in that extraordinarily luxurious castle courtyard, he spotted a statue of a naked woman bestowing a sword upon a man in armour.
He had been dumbfounded by the sight, but he quickly began to chuckle as he thought up his revenge.

“An oasis that a goddess watches over. Doesn’t it sound great? I’ve no doubt you’ll be worshipped by future visitors.”

“…It’s true that I helped out with the oasis, but why did you have to make it naked!?” she screamed.

Seeing her red face had really satisfied him. Karasu laughed happily.

“Have a look at what you’re wearing, and ask *yourself* that.”

Looking down at her cloth-wrapped body, her expression turned bitter.

“Plus, that old man thought that it would be better naked too. Since I felt that it would be blasphemous to misrepresent you, I readily agreed.”

“Didn’t you completely misrepresent my body…” muttered the woman.

Karasu’s laughing only deepened.

“I was just being considerate. I thought it would be pitiful if people started pointing out that the Goddess of the Spring was so much scrawnier than all the other goddesses.”

Her silent and sour expression made him smack the ground with laughter.
It was actually starting to hurt now.
His leg wound had been bothering him the whole time as well.

“Anyhow, bring it out. You have something this time as well, don’t you.”

It was only now that the woman realised he was wounded.

“Oh my. Could it be that you’re injured?”

Karasu nodded.

“I am.”

“You should say these sorts of things earlier. Here. A flute made from the horn of a *sekitoha*. Apparently you can hear it from a thousand miles away.”

With that, the woman produced a large flute the size of one's upper arm.

——*Again with an incredibly suspicious item…*

Whenever she appeared with an item, a lot of the time it was something peculiar.
But Karasu also noted that it was always something that helped.

When he took the flute in his hands, he noticed how light it was despite its bulky appearance.
Bringing it to his lips, he blew.

-BUOOOOOH-

A low sound seemed to spread through the land.
It felt like it went further than a person's voice could. But he still couldn't imagine that it would reach anywhere near a thousand miles.

"Oi, this isn't a fake is it."

The women tilted her head in puzzlement.

"…W-, Who knows?"

Karasu wanted to slap the flute onto the ground.

"Well, whatever. If worse comes to worse, you can just carry me the same way you do the Tohjians."

The women complained, "But I have to get up early tomorrow…" with an unwilling expression, but Karasu naturally paid her no heed.

Half an hour later.
Around the time he replaced his makeshift bandage with a new cloth from the woman, he heard the sounds of people coming to find him.
For a while, Karasu had trouble deciding if it was the flute or not.

Afterstory 2 - A Certain Super Dark Prince

The fundamental building blocks of the tower were large, cold stones.

For the past year, these gray stone walls were the limit of the boy's whole world.

At the beginning of his imprisonment, he had clawed at the large stone door many times, so many he had lost count already.

There were moments he would scream until he could scream no more and periods when he would shed countless tears because he longed to be outside.

But that had only lasted for a few days.

Now the blood on the door had been long dry, staining the stone.

--I will never be able to go outside again.

After accepting that fact, the boy began to spend the rest of his days in peace.

The only thing that disturbed his heart were small slips of rolled-up paper that would be secretly slipped in.

They offered words of encouragement and false promises never to be fulfilled; a fact that irritated him the most.

Why write such cruel words as, [We will definitely get you out], when the only key to the tower's door was hanging around his neck?

After the first few, he left those notes that seemed to appear out of nowhere unopened, and they continued to pile up in a corner of the room.

All the boy had eyes for was an old map and some ancient tales he had found in the tower.

The dream of tying the map and the story together was the only thing that had kept the boy sane.

It was in that mental state that, one day, he saw a naked woman appear in front of him.

--*Ah, I have finally become insane...*

Was what he thought.

What a suitable hallucination for a madman to see, too - a deranged dream of a woman. However, the striking realism of it all bewildered the boy.

He knew not whether he was dreaming or awake, yet he still entrusted the tower key to that woman. He had never discarded it but, at the same time, he had avoided looking at it with all his might.

Even he was unsure whether it was because he wanted to get rid of the last bit of hope, or because he desperately wanted to believe one last time.

A while after that brief encounter, the door that was never to be unlocked opened in front of his eyes.

And with that, the former Tower of the Silent Sinner crumbled down.

Afterstory 3 - A Certain Prince in Chaos and a Certain Double

"I forgot my towel..."

The boy realized when he had already started bathing himself with the hot water in the stone bathtub.

Maybe he had left the towel outside of the bathroom with his clothes? Yet, as he tried to trace back his steps, he didn't even remember getting a towel ready.

Remaining like this would probably be inconvenient bath-wise, but it also wasn't that much of a deal to bother the soldier keeping guard outside.

The boy started washing his arms after crushing some *buffle* leaves and making a soapy foam.

Slightly green bubbles started to cover his body.

Even though the boy was still not used to the grassy smell of the *buffel* leaves, he was relatively used to the life of his second confinement.

The desert king he had met during the strong sand storm had welcomed him with overly annoying, kind words. But, the boy hadn't lived a simple enough life to believe the king's words, his eyes gave him away the most, they were too sharp to match his pitying and encouraging tone.

And so, before he could rest from the numbness caused by an entire year of confinement, he was taken to Yohk'Zai with pretexts sugar-coated in kindness. In the end, he was only thrown into a new prison labeled a 'guest room', but he didn't feel any surprise or discouragement.

Compared to that tower, he now had a big window, more than enough food, and if he wished for it, he could even take baths like he was doing right now.

When he thought he had been freed, the castle was destroyed, and it could be said the land was about to… well, collapse. To be precise, they were being invaded by Yohk'Zai, and he had been imprisoned once again.

It isn't like he didn't suffer at all. But rather than thinking about the circumstances surrounding him, the boy felt hope inside of him.

He wasn't the tool of a king.

From the time he saw that ambitious and confident desert king cladded in blue clothes, he knew.

He knew this king would be able to charm people with his strong words, with his unwavering eyes, with any of his actions.

He was the one deserving the title of king.

Compared to such a magnificent king, he was almost nothing.

When he noticed that, he realized that the story he had read before in the tower was true.

He was obviously the descendant of an usurper. He wasn't the legitimate successor to the throne of Ii’Jibro.

If they were to find his true birthplace, all the people who struggled to free him would probably despair.

Why did that man who rescued his mother from the tower have to become a king? It would have been so much better if they had ran away together and lived freely, that way he wouldn't have to…!

He knew he couldn't do anything, but he still kept lamenting his ancestor's decisions time after time. Swept in by his worries, he pressed on his arm stronger.

It was at those times he felt annoyed with himself by how feminine he felt.

"And for the next one, please let it be prince Hinoki!"

A seemingly irritated and hurried voice resounded through the small bathroom.

All the steam filling the room seemed to get sucked into the direction that voice had come from, clearing his view.

"Ah. Prince Hinoki?! I did it! Mhmm, isn't it working almost all the time? Maybe this actually works all the time..."

Though he was only faking, the young Hinoki who became the king of Ii'Jibro opened his eyes in surprise.

In front of him was the witch he had met back in the tower.

Her peculiar face features and her black hair matched perfectly with the description of a witch found in the old myths of Ii'Jibro. And even though she was only covering her chests with a piece of cloth, she didn't seem to be embarrassed at all, not even minding showing her marble like skin.

At first her black eyes were brimming with joy, but when she looked down she slowly made a weird expression.

"Umm, I definitely didn't come to steal your lifespan or...fertility you know?"

"...What makes you think you can convince me?"

He coldly answered her, after she pretended to be looking away from his face.

"No, I swear! I didn't even know you were taking a bath. Or actually, I had no other choice!"

The witch looked down to a certain cloth she was holding in her hands.

"You see, I met with Huu-... I mean, that blockhead Karasu, then I wanted to take a bath together with Kyousui-san, but then I was worried she might refuse out of embarrassment!! Then I figured I'd have to give her the bathing salts, and in exchange I got this body towel… That'd mean that the next place I'd go to would be a bathroom right? So this wasn't my fault at all, it was all because of that brick dense moron Karasu, don't you think so?"

"Hold on, I can't follow your story at all."

"Well, in the first place, even though someone like me who has no relation whatsoever to this world is worrying so much about them, who does Karasu think he is to leisurely enjoy his newlywed life with Kyousui when he's the one I'm worried about the most? And anyways, why do I have to listen to his lovestruck delusions, 'An embarrassed Kyousui-san is good too, washing her back like that has always been my dream' the heck, I don't want to hear your so called dreams!"

She seemed to be burning in rage, she flailed her arms up and down. Then she suddenly seemed to run out of energy, only to start again with more strength.

The witch simply appeared without warning, started rambling endlessly on senseless stories, and freaked out of nowhere. And all of that in a half naked situation.

It had obviously been a mistake to think she was sane, she was most probably broken beyond repair...?

After doubting her sanity, he suddenly remembered his own stance, without a single string covering his body, and became embarrassed.

He immediately struck out his bubble covered arms toward the witch.

"I don't care if you came to steal my lifespan or fertility or anything. Just hand that bode towel or whatever now."

"Oh, yeah...right. You are in a difficult age after all. Sorry, sorry. Here you go."

Hinoki wrapped the cloth he received from the witch around his hips.

Then he stared intently at her.

Why did she appear in front of him again?

Was she the one who gave Huuron the key he used? If that was the case, then she must have been an accomplice in the plot organized by Yohk'Zai's king. But then why did she appear again?

Hinoki remained silent, trying to guess what the witch was trying to accomplish.

The witch too, only mumbled senselessly trying to find something to say.

Once again, the steam filled the bathroom once again while they remained in silence.

A single drop fell from the ceiling, making a splashing noise.

As if pushed by that noise, the witch broke the silence.

"Umm, you look more lively than I thought."

"I don't know what you were thinking, but I'm not really feeling bad."

"I-, I see. That's good."

Apparently she had been too vague. After looking around frantically, she gazed at Hinoki, and as if steeling her resolve, she stared intently at his body.

Hinoki was startled.

"Could it be that you are really here for my fertility?"

In an instant the witch panicked.

"I-, I'm telling you it's not that! Just forget that already. I didn't mean it that way, you see, well, I was only wondering if maybe something bad had happened to you..."

What a hard to understand witch, even though she was an accomplice of King Huuron, she would worry about the person they had imprisoned.

Hinoki snorted lightly and answered in a playful manner.

"Luckily I haven't been tortured or mistreated. King Huuron is only treating me as a guest...for now, that is."

The witch relaxed after hearing Hinoki's answer, but frowned at his last words.

"I see, it makes sense. I'm so glad I made it in time. Or no, that's not what I mean..."

She fixed her seating posture, and coughed lightly.

Then she bowed towards Hinoki, who was staring at her trying to figure out what she was trying to do.

"I'm really sorry!"

She suddenly apologized

Just how hard to understand could she be?

"I asked him. I asked Huuron to take you out of the tower and help you. I never thought he would lock you up in another tower in Yohk'Zai and take over Ii'Jibro. Aahh, If only I had thought better...I only told him to take you out of the tower, I never said anything about what to do afterwards. I can't say he didn't do what I asked for… Ahh, he's so sly it's annoying"

Hinoki was wary as he observed the witch.

Her actions and appearance were really suspicious, but he couldn't detect any other motives in her voice.

It only seemed to him like regret, anger, and suffering.

"That's why now, I will be taking up responsibility for you and save you. And don't worry, there's something we can exchange. I will make sure to send him packing and return Ii'Jibro to you."

She said hurriedly with irregular breath, clenching her fists as she spoke. Her excitement was worrying, she could easily faint from that amount of stress.

That being said, Hinoki was still doubtful that the witch was offering to help him out of the kindness of her heart.

He started thinking about what situations would favor the witch. If he didn't want to suffer more, he had to evaluate this situation from a more objective point of view.

"That's quite far-fetched for you to promise. But so what? What would you want in the case Ii'Jibro were to be taken back to me?"

Hinoki thought, perhaps she couldn't reach an agreement with Huuron, and was now trying to use him.

Maybe the witch wanted the fertile lands, or the moonstone mines, or maybe even the many treasures left behind from the age of the wise old kings.

The witch started saying "Well, there's a lot going on but–"

"In the case that happened you say… First we would need to stop the invasion of Jebas."

"What?"

Hinoki asked back surprised when he heard a response he hadn't expected at all. But the witch ignored him and started counting with her fingers.

"After that I would like to arrange the fire stones Triht wants. Then I'd like it if the unreasonable demands asked from the Ottko Yu tribe would cease, and if something could be done for the starving arrijighock. I'm also worried about the zhaltkane fields in Insen. ...so I'd also be glad if the issue with the underground water currents could be solved. Even if they couldn't be controlled, at least if their movements could be predicted..."

Hinoki was left more open-mouthed as she continued speaking.

It wasn't just farfetched anymore. After listing all the names of those other countries, she even mentioned the underground water currents.

Even if she was a witch, this was too unreasonable. If there was any creature capable of doing all that, it could only be god.

"Ho-, hold on a minute. Are you serious about all that?"

"Of course I'm serious."

The witch stated while nodding.

"Thinking about it, this all started because I helped that stranded person… And the way this is going, I can't enjoy taking a long bath anymore. Since I'm giving up my bath time for this, I want to see it through to the end."

Hinoki couldn't understand what the witch was trying to say at all.

Who did she refer to as a stranded person? In the first place, what kind of relationship did a long bath have with all those countries she mentioned before?

"That's why, I'll first let you escape from here. Then you'll have to hide with someone until everything cools down."

Saying so, she extended her hand.

Her hand didn't look like the hand of a warrior, nor the hand of a peasant. More than anything, it looked like the hand of the aristocrats that surrounded Hinoki when his father was still alive.

Smooth skin that never tasted hardships, but gave a completely different impression

"I don't get it. What would you get from meddling with those countries? Don't you want some kind of compensation? What about money? Or Silver? Did you consider snatching all the treasure of Ii'Jibro maybe?"

"That would be nice~. All sorts of riches...I'm a woman after all, I love shiny things. But no matter how much I would get, there would be no meaning to it."

——*She's contradicting herself.*

"Anyways, hurry up! It will be more difficult if you start suspecting me."

The witch leaned forward from her room, and grabbed the confused Hinoki's arm.

Hinoki immediately pulled away from that arm trying to run away from it.

Thanks to the *buffle* foam the witch's hand slipped.

"Huh, hold on!"

The witch screamed startled.

However, Hinoki was more surprised by his own reaction than the witch's.

If he were to follow the witch, he might be able to become the ruler of Ii'Jibro, even if only in name. He would be able to be seated in the same throne his father was once, and overlook the vassal families that once served him.

Even if he wasn't the rightful owner of the throne, it would probably please the people more if he was the ruler than being slaves of Yohk'Zai.

But, only thinking about becoming a king made him shudder.

——*I might not be a madman yet, but my mind broke a long time ago.*

He was too weak. When his suspicions were suddenly confirmed, Hinoki could only admit it himself.

"I'm thankful for your kindness, but I can't accept it."

"Huh? Why?"

She wasn't aware of the situation surrounding Hinoki, so she innocently tilted her head in confusion.

"I don't have what it takes to become a king. What could some dunce who got trapped twice even do?"

"But, you couldn't help that. You are still a child after all..."

Seeing the witch refusing to back off, Hinoki started getting annoyed.

"What does being a child have to do with this? How many people do you think would be naive enough to be more considerate only because I'm a child?"

"Well, right… Hmm, then, you should just get some kind of guardian or assistant. If you ask those people who were trying to rescue you from the tower, I'm sure they will agree to help you, they seemed like decent people after all."

When Hinoki heard her, he was enveloped in an indescribable feeling of guilt.

He had always been troubled when he thought if he should feel any gratitude towards those people who struggled to free him.

He never was a person worthy of being saved!

"If they were to find out about my true birth place, they'd probably go away."

The witch frowned.

Even the witch would probably lose any interest and disappear if she knew who Hinoki truly was.

He screamed then, trying to throw away all the hesitation he had amassed deep in his heart.

"I'm not of the lineage of the king. I'm just the son of an usurper!"

"Eh. What, you knew about that?"

".....huh?"

The witch sounded completely indifferent.

"The man who rescued your mother from the tower was your dad, right? Your ancestor was a brave man, to rescue your mother, opposing the king..."

...It was true, he was brave, or rather, must have been brave. But, that's not the problem at hand now.

"Th-that's why, I can't become the king."

"Why?"

"Are you really paying attention to me?"

"How rude. I did hear you. You just aren't from the first generation's king lineage, right?"

It seemed like she was trying to tell him 'What's the problem with that?'

The path the conversation took was so different from what Hinoki expected he was in a loss of words.

"The story of your ancestor taking over the throne is already a pretty old story, yes? And since then after the next generations of kings you came, it's your lineage, more than enough time has passed. And first——"

The witch confidently said while she held onto his arm, but was suddenly interrupted.

"If I keep quiet, they won't find out."

"So that's the problem!"

As he responded, Hinoki held his head in a crouching position.

The longer he talked with the witch, the more he felt his own common sense was crumbling.

"And apart from that, what other problem is there? Ah, you know, if you don't want it to be known you can try getting closer to the Ottko Yu tribe."

"Why is that?"

"Because the Ottko Yu tribe already knows about it."

Even though it was a secret that only he should know...

Hinoki sat where he was out of exhaustion, both from the relief from having that load off his back, and the stupidity he felt for tormenting himself with an inferiority complex.

"Talking with you...is making my head feel strange."

"...Wait, what do you mean with that?"

The witch glared at Prince Hinoki with a devious look. But shrugged it off and said.

"Well, somehow I get that you were troubled by many little worries. But look, even though I knew all of that, I still want to support you. Also for the sake of all Ii'Jibro. So now, come, it's time to go."

She extended her hand once again.

Hinoki looked at that hand for a while, but then silently shook his head.

"I can't. After all, I can't become a king."

The witch received that with a puzzled look.

"I realize you don't care about my lineage. But, many people do care, and they would clearly live in anxiety. And on top of that——I'm not cut out to be a king. Even if...even if I were to accept your help, and become the king, Ii'Jibro would surely plunge into chaos sooner or later."

He wasn't born to be a king, not his lineage, but all of him. Once he accepted that, there was no way to change his mindset.

He hated his own powerlessness on one side, his strength left his back, and he felt the air being sucked away from his lungs.

He felt a rock stuck in his gut, only by thinking of Ii'Jibro's future.

He glanced at her. The witch who was always nude for some reason, didn't seem to be afraid or embarrassed in front of people, and always spoke with incomprehensible words. But perhaps, if he were to listen to her, who even was worried about the underground water currents——

"Witch, if you care about the people of Ii'Jibro, please hear my one request."

She seemed to be lost in thought pondering about something, then she blinked once and looked at Hinoki.

"King Huuron is a strong king. He must seem like an amazing king to the people in his own country. Somehow, I'd want that the people of Ii'Jibro to receive that same blessing."

"In other words, you are saying you want to entrust Ii'Jibro to King Huuron?"

Hinoki nodded.

"Exactly. Only the integrity of the properties and social status of the people, that's all I want. I mean to pass everything to him right now."

"Right now?! Can't it be done later? Even if you are being treated as a guest for now, there's no proof you will be safe later on. And also, you had to go through a whole year of suffering already, do you really want to live like that..."

"You seem quite unsure. Maybe we can make an exchange with 'convincing him'? Or were those exchanges you mentioned only some bluff?"

"They weren't some bluff. I'm sure I could convince him. I'm sure but..."

While the witch hesitated, Hinoki started smiling.

He made a broad smile, a smile that contained no fear of shame nor arrogance.

"Then it's fine. This will be my last order as a phony king. I won't ask for anything more."

She stared fixedly at Hinoki. The black eyes of a witch were said to be able to see through any lie. So, Hinoki looked back at her fixedly, without looking away.

After a while, the witch reluctantly nodded.

"...Okay. I didn't want it, but I accept that you don't want to become a king. I will try to convince him as soon as I can, propose to him my conditions and release you."

"I will be thankful if you do."

Hinoki faced the witch and bowed.

He was almost always treated as a weakling, his life in confinement that slowly tainted his determination, when he thought about the meaning of all of that, and realizing there would be an end to it, made it become something completely different.

"Listen, do you have anything you want to do? What do you intend to do after you are out of here and stop being a king?"

After hearing all that, the only thought he could think about was the map he had seen in the tower.

He always dreamed of seeing with his own eyes all the countries he could only read about in books, the snowy village of Triht, the knowledgeable kingdom of Insen, the land of Tohji far in the northern side, and the place called paradise, Jebas.

"Do you remember the map I showed you before? If I could, I'd like to see...Oh well, never mind."

He suddenly shook his head to untangle himself from being absorbed into his dreams.

There was no way he could be allowed to be that selfish.

He could only live like his ancestors did before, as a regular person in Ii'Jibro. And hopefully be able to at least help some people that way.

"The map huh. Alright! This was a bit different from what I expected, but it should play off well. ...by the way, hasn't something been smelling since a while ago? What is that grassy smell? Whoa, it's from my hands. Could it be from the green bubbles in your arm?"

She smelled her hands while her brows twitched in disgust.

"It's Yohk'Zai's soap. It does smell bad. Even if I'm used to live in confinement I can't get used to that smell."

Hinoki took the jar with powdered *buffle* leaves and showed it to the witch.

"Huh, wait, what is this, is this some kind of flag? Did I just raise a flag? It wasn't enough with the body towel?"

For an instant, the witch seemed to be about to burst into tears.

"Ahh, whatever, I don't care anymore. Take this you thief!"

For some reason the witch forcefully exchanged the handmade soap she had gotten from the prince of Jebas with the *buffle* leaves. Hinoki once again started doubting her sanity after that——

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*Both of them are wearing a towel during the whole conversation.

Afterstory 4 - The Newcomer

——It does stink after all.

Izumi washed away the greeny bubbles she had formed in the shower.

The pulverized soap contained in the vase she had traded with Prince Hinoki, confined inside a tower in Yohk'Zai, had a foul stench.

Every now and then, she would be unable to stand the grassy smell floating in the air. Or rather than grassy, it was like the smell of mashed weed, or maybe like the green moss that appears in water tanks during summer reeks. Just thinking that this had been man-made left a deep mark on her, in a certain sense.

But to make matters worse, this soap's bad points didn't end there. It was also bad forming foam, and more than often, would remain like jelly.

In any case, it is said that good medicine tastes bitter, and that soap was most probably produced without any additives. Thinking like that, Izumi decided to try using it, but....

"Even if this would be the best thing in the world for my skin, my sanity can't handle it!"

She heaved a deep sigh, and started scrubbing it off under the shower.

In the end, Izumi washed herself with the usual soap, and entered the bath.

That soap, the one she liked the most throughout the years, wasn't bad. While it wasn't bad, she missed the soft, smooth soap she had received from the prince of Jebas.

That soap, hand-made by the prince himself, was in his own words, a marvelous bathing experience.

Normally Izumi needed to use a moisturizer from the start of fall until early summer for her dry skin, but she didn't need to use one the day she tried that soap.

Though, she was able to use it only once...

But she didn't only regret losing the soap, for instance the bathing salts, which hadn't been used a single time by her.

Izumi joined her hands and scooped up some water. She sighed as she watched the water dripping down between her fingers.

If she had used those bathing salts, just what kind of wonderful smell would this water have?

——*I can't give up on it after all.*

Izumi stared blankly into space.

And proceeded to glare at the dark skinned man she imagined floating there.

All that happened had been his fault for harboring those boring aspirations.

If it came to this, she only needed the prince of Jebas to be able to travel the world freely!

To do that, it was indispensable for the world beyond the window to be in peace.

For Prince Hinoki's sake, for the sake of all the people who were being victims of Karasu's ambitions, and for her own sake too...

——*Let's do it, peace for the world!*

She clenched her fists as she renewed her determination

Then, she suddenly noticed.

Her connection to that world wouldn't be cut as long as there was a certain someone there who would need this mid-summer parched water tank reeking soap.

After hearing the tense situation that world was in, Izumi went to meet the real Huuron first, and checked Karasu's real identity. Then, she met with Prince Hinoki, and asked for his will.

Who should she go meet next then?

Maybe she should go meet with Roten and Yuataree to have a fine conversation with them?

Or maybe go explain what was happening to Princess Aqua, and tell her that her brother is coming back?

Actually, didn't Sunayu's Queen, Hitow, talk highly of her fiance, King Cornou from Tohji? Maybe it'd be a good idea to stop there and ask for their assistance too.

And since the underground water currents worried her too, she wanted to meet with Mira again.

Her resolve to crush Karasu's ambitions and help all the countries affected by them was set, but she still wasn't sure where to start.

In the first place, who on earth would like that mid-summer parched water tank stinking soap?

Then again, she had always been worried about a dispute starting between Yohk'Zai and Triht anytime soon.

Thinking about that again, she remembered the ruler of Triht, Setsugen.

When she met him in the mountains, Setsugen gave the impression of a reserved and honest lad.

Though later she found out he was quite popular...

But for him to wage a war with Yohk'Zai was a bit hard to imagine.

In the first place, he wouldn't have a chance to win if that happened.

Izumi continued thinking as she folded her arms inside the bathtub.

Then it occurred to her, first she needed to buy time while there was no war.

If a war *were to happen*, the scars left by it in the form of resent would remain for a long time. Only distancing the peaceful world Izumi wished for far, far away.

But then again, what could she do to buy more time?

Just how far did the preparations for war go on both sides, and where were they planning on carrying it out?

"Hmm...."

Izumi groaned. Normally she would clear her mind of any thoughts, and either stare blankly at the steam, or read a book she had brought to the bathroom.

——*I'm the only one who could create any advantage I guess.*

If they could get Yohk'Zai inside the snowy mountains, they would probably have trouble against small guerrilla armies.

——*Wait, that's not exactly defensive tactics...*

In the first place, since Triht needed fire stones, they had no other chance but to go fight for them.

But it was hard to imagine they would be able to fight to their fullest in a terrain they were not used to, like the desert.

So, if for example, they were to form an alliance with people used to the desert, they might have a better chance.

"...huh?"

Izumi accidentally let her voice out.

When she met Setsugen inside the mountains, he was on his way to meet with the Kak'Kenah tribe, or so she had been told by the old baldie who was trying to capture Princess Yunoha.

But then when Setsugen heard that Teo Keh had probably already met with Huuron, he said he didn't have any business in Zaharya anymore.

Then, that would mean that...

"Everything makes sense now."

Izumi dropped her head.

How could it be? Not only Karasu, but Setsugen too, both were thinking of carrying out something dangerous when they met with Izumi.

The people she met beyond the window were not only weak people in trouble.

Izumi noticed her own naiveness.

Maybe in the case of Setsugen there were certain circumstances beyond his own control...

But still, no matter what the reason, that is in no way an acceptable excuse to involve normal people in a war.

Then again, why did he think the Kak'Kenah tribe would accept to join forces with Triht?

On top of that, the brother of the tribe chief had been bribed by Yukama, and was prepared to poison Setsugen's drink at a banquet. Taking that into

consideration, it seemed there were internal problems in the Kak'Kenah tribe too.

When she thought that far, she faintly heard a person's voice.

After listening a bit more attently, she noticed it was a male voice.

A groaning….and rude voice, the kind that would seem to be used to curse.

——*Err...*

Izumi was worried. If the window really connected to the person she was wanted to, who was she thinking about this time?

While she hesitated, the voice continued speaking without a moment's rest.

"Dammit" "Screw this" "Goddammit!"

The person on the other side of the window seemed quite annoyed and impatient.

She didn't know with whom the window connected, but there was nothing she could do about that. Standing up, she opened the window.

"Oh, a new face."

The person standing outside the window was someone she had never seen before. He seemed to be in his twenties, and his long hair was tied with a red string. His exposed musculous arm was of the same brown hue as the desert habitants.

But the place where this man was, wasn't the desert but a rocky area.

Many rocks of various sizes were tumbling around, and the man was sitting on top of one of them.

"Ah?"

The man shot a dubious glance at Izumi and...

"ah?.....Whoaaa."

He stood up screaming.

Immediately falling backwards and landing seated on the ground.

Izumi looked at the man worried, palling by the thought he may have dislocated his back out of the shock.

His bare left arm was buried inside the rocks from the wrist upwards.

At least, it seemed he hadn't dislocated his back, but he couldn't stand because his arm was trapped inside the rocks.

"That hurts..."

He painfully started massaging his left shoulder.

Then proceeded to glare at Izumi.

"Hey, necromancer. Don't you know it's cowardly to sneak up on people when they can't move!"

Izumi was worried his arm might be getting crushed under the rocks, but the man seemed to be plenty energetic.

"Well no, I wasn't exactly trying to do that. ...by the way, you can't pull your arm out?"

"You can tell only by looking. Damn, what did I get myself into."

The man forcefully kicked the rock covering his arm. After a while, many small rocks fell all around them.

Izumi stuck her head out the window startled. And soon, turned pale again.

The place where he was was a steep slope, and many rocks were piled up far above them. The way it stood there, seemingly about to fall in any moment screamed danger.

Actually, some of it might have just finished falling down, seeing how the ground was showered in rocks.

"Were you trapped by the falling rocks? Or actually, if you kick the rocks like that, won't that cause more of them to fall from above?!"

"What do you want me to do? Just sit here like a duck and wait 'till I starve to death?"

The man continued kicking the rock.

"W-wait! Stop!"

If he continued like that, Izumi would also get dragged into a rock avalanche.

Izumi hastily stood up from the bathtub and went to pick up the vase with the mid-summer water tank soap.

"Hey, look at this! I'll give you this!"

"Ahh? Aren't those *buffles*? They smell as awful as ever huh."

Apparently this man knew of this soap.

"So? What do you want me to do with this?"

Izumi scooped up some water in a bucket, and put the mid-summer water tank soap——*buffle* powder in it. After a while, the water was slippery.

"Soak your arm in this, and then let it flow through the gap between the rocks."

The man finally seemed to understand how the *buffle* could be used.

He soaked his arm while he grimaced at the smell.

Finally he inclined the bucket, and let the water flow through the rocks. He took a deep breath.

"Huff."

Mustering all the force he could, he pulled his arm.

Once again, rocks fell around.

"I'm telling you to stop! Please stay quiet for a while! Else I'll close the window and go away alone!"

"Shut up you sorcerer. Do you think I can do something else when I'm trapped like this?"

Saying so, the man yanked his arm again, and one third time.

Izumi's heart raced as she watched him.

But in the end, it didn't seem like his arm would move a single inch.

"Dammit, I can't pull it out."

Izumi prepared another bucket of water mixed with *buffle* and handed it over to the man. Then she peeked over to the rock.

Seemingly not in pain, he probably wasn't wounded. There was probably a vacuum on the other side of the rock.

After looking closer, there was also a small gap around his arm.

There was in fact...a gap.

"...Umm. Just in case but...maybe you are clenching your fist?"

Izumi asked him in a monotone voice.

"..."

He seemed surprised for a second, then fell silent. A while after that he looked away from Izumi...

In the following seconds, the man's arm came out of the rock without problems.

——He's an idiot. He's definitely an idiot.

"It's- It's not what you think. There was a reason for that, I tell you."

He probably noticed he was being taken for an idiot by Izumi.

Flustered, he started explaining himself.

"I was holding a bag with gunpowder! That's really valuable so, if possible, I wanted to take it home with me."

"...Hmmm."

She couldn't avoid giving him an indifferent look.

Well, at least she was glad he could free his arm. Thinking of telling him something along those lines, she caught on to something weird.

"Tell me. That gunpowder, what did you want to use it for?"

Izumi asked him while glancing at the rock scattered around them.

Gunpowder, falling rocks, and the stupidity of the man. For once, this time, if she thought of all the possibilities...

The man answered while averting his eyes.

"Yeah, that's right, you guessed right, I was blowing the rock up! I got caught between the rock avalanche I caused myself. Do you have a problem with that?!"

He turned on the offense immediately.

She let an exasperated sigh out.

"Why, why did you want to do something like that… Are you going to start building something?"

He tried moving his hand around a bit to make sure everything was alright.

"No. I was destroying a road. The road that goes down to my village from Pirenia."

"Huh? Pirenia?"

She had heard that name before, but she couldn't remember where.

"Where was...Pirenia again?"

"It's a mountain between Triht and Zaharya. Hmm, sorcerers are more ignorant than I thought."

"Ah, right, yeah. I heard that from Sentoor. Pirenia huh."

The dense knight Sentoor had said the mountain hut Setsugen was in, was located in Pirenia.

She heaved a sigh of relief after successfully remembering.

"....What?!"

She unconsciously shrieked, and pulled herself forward.

"Whoa"

For some reason, the man jumped back.

"Pirenia from Triht?! Why? Why did you destroy the road, Ah! Maybe, maybe you are a spy from Yohk'Zai?"

There was no doubt, the tanned skin he had was a special trait from the inhabitants of the desert. He probably came to block the road under Huuron's orders.

"Who are you calling a spy from Yohk'Zai?"

The man frowned in disgust as he pointed at Izumi.

"Though in the first place, for you to show those so boldly, do you even have decency?"

Izumi glanced to where he was pointing, in other words...her own chest.

"...Ahh, mmmm, **cough**"

She cleared her throat.

Then she yelled "Wait there for a sec!" and dashed over to the dressing room.

She returned to the bathroom after hurriedly wrapping a towel around herself.

The man was carelessly waiting for her, his arm resting on the window frame.

"Seriously, you lack something called decency...."

He shook his head in pity after seeing her clothed with only a bath towel.

"Shut up already! I don't care if someone thinks I'm indecent anyways. In the first place. Who are you? You aren't someone from Yohk'Zai? Why did you destroy the road?"

Izumi shot one question after another.

"I'm the brother of Cho'Shaw, the chief of the Kak'Kenah tribe. My name is Goemon. You could say I'm from Yohk'Zai, but not at the same time..."

He was speaking with a half closed mouth, so his enunciation wasn't the best, but now wasn't the time to pay attention to that.

"Then...you...are the person who was bribed by Yukama, and tried to poison Setsugen, that brother of the Kak'Kenah tribe chief?"

After she said that, the man——Goemon's whole body sprung back. He reached out for his hip, to the dagger he carried there.

"Just who are you?"

He spoke with a strained tone. Izumi waved her hands around flustered.

"It-It's not what you think. I'm not a spy or something. I'm not even someone from Triht or Yohk'Zai!"

However, Goemon was still wary.

"Then you are a rebel against me then!"

Izumi trembled hearing him roar in anger. She tilted her head a while later.

"No, just think calmly for a moment. A rebel wouldn't want to work for you, but I even helped you out."

Goemon stood still for a few seconds, "You have a point there" he said, and moved his hand away from the dagger.

Izumi heaved a sigh of relief.

"Umm, I want to ask a lot of stuff, but if you mind that I won't ask as much. The only thing I really want to know is, why did you destroy the road?"

Goemon bit his lips. Then he finally spoke.

"To protect the people of Triht from being attacked by Yohk'Zai."

Izumi blinked a few times.

"Could it be that the reason you accepted to help Yukama and poison Setsugen was the same?"

"Exactly"

Goemon looked straight at Izumi's eyes, then continued talking without a rest.

"That bastard Setsugen. He wanted to use my village as a base to attack Yohk'Zai. And my brother joined hands with him… He's so wrong about doing that! How long has it been since we were independized from Yohk'Zai? Only twenty damn years! Twenty years since we were held captive by Yohk'Zai, twenty years since we had to battle, twenty years since we had plowed all our ravaged fields again… Yes, maybe we did get confined to a smaller area, but my mom, all the women in the village, everyone was so happy. But now, he...he wants to throw all the Kak'Kenah tribe out to fight again?! What does he think of all that we had to go through before..."

Goemon sat desperately there, hugging his legs.

"...I know. I know I hadn't been born yet when the battle with Yohk'Zai happened, but my brother was already twenty years old. He succeeded mom after witnessing my dad be killed in battle, or so I was told. I understand why my brother and relatives hold a grudge with Yohk'Zai. But, what could they possibly accomplish this late!"

Izumi remained silent. She couldn't find words to tell him.

It wasn't just a discussion on whether the people who enjoyed their current life or the ones who resented their past lives were wrong, either.

Only——

"The only thing I want is peace for the world."

Izumi mumbled in a sigh. No matter in which world, it's impossible to separate black from white, good from evil. It's impossible to grant the wishes of each and every person.

Goemon raised his head and looked at Izumi.

"How long will it take for the people of Triht to restore the road you destroyed?"

"One month or less..."

"That would be more than enough. Can you stand for a moment"

Izumi stretched her hand to Goemon. He timidly took it, and forcefully stood up.

"I'll fulfill your wish."

"What?"

Goemon raised his eyebrows.

"I'm saying I'll stop the conflict between Yohk'Zai and Triht. If the two countries don't attack each other, your brother won't do anything either right?"

"Ah, yeah…."

The man nodded. Izumi smiled at him and said,

"In any case, I'll need something as an advance payment. That string tied around your hair, that should be enough!"

The End